Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
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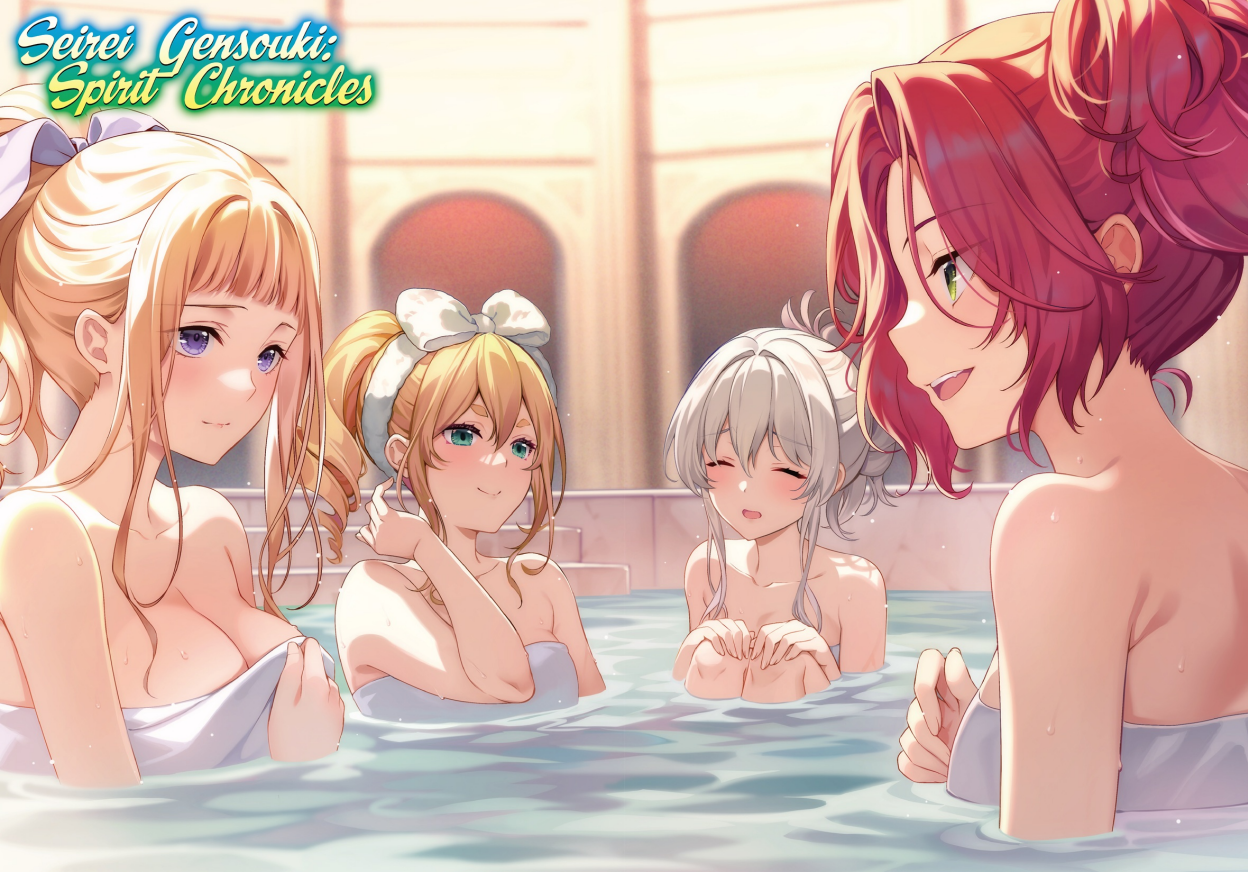
Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles
Where Fiction Lies

"WATCH OUT."
"WHA—?!"
Miharu turned so red, it was like her face had been painted. She tried to jump up out of surprise and nearly fell off of Rio's body. Rio caught her and held her.


Seirei Gensouki:
Spirit Chronicles

LOOK THIS WAY. LOOK AT ME... SAVE ME... PLEASE.
Christina quietly moved her lips. Those were, indeed, her words of weakness; they were her genuine thoughts.

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Rio (Haruto Amakawa)

The main character of this series who reincarnated as an orphan from the Beltrum Kingdom. Awakened as the transcendent one named the "Dragon King" after a deadly battle with a hero and was erased from everyone's memories for a while. In his previous life, he was a Japanese university student named Amakawa Haruto.

Aishia

Rio's contract spirit who calls him Haruto. A spirit whose true identity is the artificial creation of the Wise God Lina.

Celia Claire

Noblewoman from the Beltrum Kingdom. A genius sorcerer and Rio's former academy teacher.

Latifa

A werefox girl from the spirit folk village. Her previous life was that of an elementary school student named Endo Suzune.

Sara

A silver werewolf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Alma

An elder dwarf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Orphia

A high elf girl from the spirit folk village. Currently in the Galarc Kingdom with Miharu.

Ayase Miharu

A high school student from another world. Haruto's childhood friend and first love.

Sendo Aki

A middle school student from another world. Was repenting for her mistake with her older brother Takahisa, but...

Sendo Masato

An elementary school student from another world. Awakened as a hero after Saint Erica's death.

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Currently with her older sister Christina.

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. Escaped her home nation to oppose the Arbor faction.

Sendo Takahisa
Aki and Masato's brother from their original world. Currently the hero of the Centostella Kingdom.

Sakata Hiroaki
A hero from another world. Operates with the support of Duke Huguenot.

Shigekura Rui
A high school student from another world. The hero of the Beltrum Kingdom.

Kikuchi Renji
One of the heroes from another world. An adventurer unaffiliated with any kingdom, until...

Liselotte Cretia
Noblewoman from the Galarc Kingdom and president of the Ricca Guild. She was a high school student named Minamoto Rikka in her past life.

Sora
Disciple of Rio's past life. Serves Rio after he awakened as the Dragon King.

Sumeragi Satsuki
Miharu's friend from their original world. Currently the hero of the Galarc Kingdom.

Charlotte Galarc
Second Princess of the Galarc Kingdom. Once showed strong affection towards Haruto.

Reiss
A mysterious man pulling the strings behind the scenes. Wary of Rio for always disrupting his plans.

Sakuraba Erika
The woman who caused a revolution in a minor nation. Fulfilled her wish after her battle with Rio and died.

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Prologue: The Current State of the Restoration

The morning after the golem attack, in a room of the guest house the Restoration was using in the Galarc Kingdom...

"Hmm..."

Gustav Huguenot, a leading noble of the Beltrum Kingdom, glared at the document in his right hand with a listless look. He was seated in an office chair and checking the financial report of the Restoration.

After losing their headquarters in Rodania, the Restoration was in a precarious situation. Only a few hundred members of the organization had evacuated when the Beltrum army led by Duke Arbor's faction had attacked Rodania, and the majority of those members were women and children—only a few officials and soldiers had made it out with them.

As they had evacuated with only the clothes on their backs, most of the Restoration's fortune had also been left behind in Rodania. The only assets they had were intangible things like personnel and intellectual property.

The current income of the Restoration was entirely reliant on Celia: She was donating the profits from her presentations of the sorcery knowledge she possessed to Christina. Without that, they would have been lodging in the Galarc Kingdom without compensation.

This isn't good...

They were barely maintaining the appearance of an organization; they lacked the income to reliably continue supporting several hundred members.

If this situation drags on, the members will lose morale. We need something to remind them of our momentum and justification.

If possible, it would be something too impactful to argue against. Some good news would be most welcome.

Declaring Princess Christina's ascension to the throne was a start.

It was just the other day that Christina had dispatched Celia as a messenger to Duke Arbor, announcing her intention to ascend as queen. Under the laws of the Beltrum Kingdom, a new monarch had to undergo a coronation ceremony. However, as long as they made a declaration using the regalia that proved their

royal authority, they would temporarily be regarded as the legitimate king.

Christina had used the regalia to declare her ascension to Duke Arbor, so she was already regarded as an official queen of Beltrum. Since King Philip III was also still in power, the regal power over Beltrum was split between them. It was the birth of the first dyarchy in the history of the Beltrum Kingdom.

However, since Christina was currently staying outside the kingdom, she had no real power she could use.

In the end, it was just a desperate last resort to buy time. With an overwhelming majority of the nobles in the kingdom belonging to the Arbor faction, the legitimacy of her ascension will obviously be rejected.

Duke Huguenot bit his lip and frowned at the thought of the future waiting for them. The problem was that her ascension was only temporarily regarded as legitimate. As long as the other party went through the proper legal process, they could reject Christina's legitimacy.

If three-quarters of the nobility in Beltrum voted against her ascension, Christina's legitimacy would be retroactively denied. In other words, it would be as though she had never been queen at all.

If the legitimacy of her ascension is denied, the justification of the Restoration would also be denied. If that happens, it won't just be a matter of losing morale anymore.

Losing morale was just the beginning. At worst, it could create internal conflict, leading to the collapse of the organization itself.

We'd also get a lot more criticism from the Galarc Kingdom. We're already at the mercy of King Francois—a single decision could make us nomads.

The other problem with the Restoration was their lack of headquarters. If they didn't retake their base, they would be unable to resume activity in their home country. They were only able to maintain their organization right now thanks to King Francois's kindness. If they ever became a detriment to the Galarc Kingdom, the nobles here would oppose their stay.

King Francois agreed to accommodate us because of our mutual interests.

In other words, the Galarc Kingdom didn't want the Beltrum Kingdom joining hands with their potential enemy nation—the Proxia Empire—while in the hands of the Arbor faction. In order to prevent that, they were willing to support the Restoration in taking down the Arbor faction, but...

If we do not live up to expectations, they may give up on us. We need to prove there's merit to the Restoration staying in Galarc... Doing so would also improve our morale.

Thankfully, there was still time. Voting to deny the ascension to the throne had to be proposed at the coronation ceremony, so they had until then.

We need to come up with something by the coronation ceremony. Something with enough influence to overturn our situation... There's no one better than him.

The first thing that came to mind was a certain boy.

Haruto Amakawa. If we can bring him into the Restoration, retrieving Rodania will no longer be a mere dream.

At that thought, flames of excitement lit up in Duke Huguenot's eyes. When he recalled the way Haruto had fought in the rooftop garden of the Galarc Castle, his heart beat like he was a young boy again. The way Haruto had fought with the golems was like watching a one-man army—no, even that would be an understatement.

I want him. We need his power, no matter what it takes...

Duke Huguenot longed to invite Haruto to their side. Of course, he had considered it in the past as well, but now that they had lost their base in Rodania, his power was more valuable than ever.

What intrigues me is how I had lost all memory of him up until yesterday...

But Duke Huguenot had no idea that Rio was a transcendent one. He hadn't been invited to the explanation after the battle—only King Francois and the residents of Rio's mansion had been in attendance, as well as...

Princess Christina may have received some information through King Francois...

The excitement from his eyes faded as the frown returned to his face.

But would she share that information with me?

He was unsure if Christina would pass that information down to him.

For some reason, Her Majesty seems rather passive when it comes to soliciting him.

He recalled how her reaction had been rather lukewarm the last time he suggested inviting Rio to their side. His proposal back then had been to offer Rio one of the daughters of a Restoration-affiliated noble family as a mistress.

All my past suggestions were avoided and ended ambiguously. Because of that, Her Majesty seems reluctant to discuss anything regarding him with me.

Was it because it was a topic she refused to budge on? She seemed wary whenever he brought up Haruto, reacting rather questionably.

Thus, Duke Huguenot had also stopped bringing up Rio in front of Christina.

This was because he had stopped expecting her to do anything when it came to soliciting Rio.

What happened when a human stopped expecting things from someone? They endured, they gave up, they ceased to speak to that someone. However...

The situation is what it is. We cannot afford to avoid the topic any longer.

Having lost their base in Rodania, the situation was vastly different to before. They needed something dramatic to bring the Restoration back from the brink of downfall. And the key to that was Rio.

I need to approach Her Majesty about gaining his assistance once more.

Everything was for the sake of the Restoration—and the Beltrum Kingdom, Duke Huguenot privately thought with determination.

Hopefully we'll be able to present an enticing offer to him...

Frankly speaking, it was questionable whether the Restoration was capable of offering anything worthy. In fact, the only thing he could think of was an arranged marriage with a noblewoman from a prominent family.

After everything that happened this time, it's clear he has many mysteries. I'd like to have a bit more information about him. It would be good if I could ask the people near him, but...

Duke Huguenot knew less about Haruto Amakawa than he thought. No, it wasn't only Haruto.

The people around him are equally mysterious. Though there's no doubt they're capable...

Satsuki and her friends aside, there was little that he knew about Sara's and Gouki's respective groups. Sara's group appeared to interact with Rio as friends, but Gouki's group seemed to be vassals that had pledged their loyalty to him. All he knew for certain was that they were all excellent warriors. In other words, they were a treasure trove of personnel.

At any rate, those closest to Haruto weren't very public figures. Just like him, they had no interest in their social status and rarely ever left the mansion. King Francois also seemed to respect that, as he had made it extremely difficult to gather information regarding them—any outsider who wanted contact with the residents of the mansion had to go through Princess Charlotte first.

The same goes for that little girl who appeared with Haruto—Sora, I believe?

If Duke Huguenot's memory was correct, she was a completely new face. And she appeared to be quite attached to Haruto.

Even a little girl like her possessed abnormal strength. Where does he find all of them?

Like Gouki's group, she had black hair, which was rarely seen in the Strahl region.

I believe they said Haruto's parents were immigrants. Was it through that connection?

Duke Huguenot could only guess based on the little information he had about Haruto's background.

It's such an uncommon hair color, though...

He tried to think if he had met anyone similar in the past.

That boy.

There was one person in Duke Huguenot's memories who matched that trait. He had never spoken to him in person, and the few times he saw him, it had always been from afar. But he had left quite an impression on him.

"...Rio, if I'm not mistaken."

He was the orphan who had saved Flora when she was kidnapped in her youth. As a result, he had enrolled in the Royal Academy, but five years later, he had been suspected of pushing Flora off a cliff during the outdoor drill. After that, he had vanished from the Royal Academy.

Duke Huguenot's own son Stewart had been involved in that incident, so he had been personally involved in dealing with the aftermath and punishing Rio.

Duke Huguenot grimaced—it wasn't a very good memory. But in the next moment, his eyes widened with a gasp.

He had heard that name just recently.

"That little girl..."

Yesterday, right after Rio and Sora had been summoned in the rooftop garden. While everyone had been dumbfounded by their sudden appearance, Sora had turned to Haruto.

"She called him 'Master Rio,' didn't she?" Duke Huguenot murmured, eyes glinting.

No, it wasn't only yesterday. When we were evacuating from Rodania, Haruto and that little girl helped us.

Hadn't she called Haruto by the name "Master Rio" that time too? The moment he recalled that, the scattered points connected in Duke Huguenot's mind. If that was the case...

No, but... He wasn't certain. He had no other proof.

Duke Huguenot remained frozen with his hand over his mouth for a long moment.

Chapter 1: Rio and Miharu

The day Rio defeated the golem, that very evening, Miharu was visiting the world of her dreams. She was there to question Lina about why she kissed Rio while she had been possessing Miharu's body.

The dreamworld was a pure white space. Lina couldn't be physically seen, but was still able to converse without a problem. Thus, Miharu had been yelling at her.

"So in the end, which one are you in love with? Amakawa Haruto or Rio?" Lina asked, turning the tables on her instead.

"Huh...?" Miharu was so caught off guard, she looked like she had been slapped.

"What's wrong? Can't answer?" Lina's voice said calmly, indifferent to Miharu's shock.

"Wh-What do you mean by 'which one'? Why would you say that?" Miharu stuttered, voice shrill.

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She was clearly flustered by the question. That being said, she had once asked herself the same thing, back when the Galarc Kingdom had hosted that banquet—just after she had learned that Rio's past life was Amakawa Haruto.

She had found her answer already.

"After the banquet hosted by the Galarc Kingdom, you said to Sendo Takahisa that it was both. That you loved both Amakawa Haruto and the Rio of this world."

It's both. I think I love both of them. Haruto from before he was reborn and Haruto now. I fell in love with the same person twice.

Miharu herself was the one who had said those words to Takahisa when he had tried to kidnap her from Galarc. With her power to see the future, it was no surprise Lina knew what she said.

"You know that as well?" Miharu asked with a grimace.

"Of course I'd know; you're my reincarnation," Lina said plainly. She then added callously, "So why couldn't you answer me just now?"

"I was just surprised by your sudden question...!"

"So your feelings haven't changed, then?"

Miharu paused briefly before nodding. "That's right," she said.

"Really?" Lina immediately replied, sounding doubtful.

"It's the truth. I really think that," Miharu said, placing a hand over her chest. She loved both Rio and Amakawa Haruto. Those feelings of hers hadn't changed. So why did she feel so shaken by giving her answer?

"It looks like you haven't made up your mind yet," Lina pointed out.

"That's not the case," Miharu said firmly, shaking her head.

"Then let me change the question. If Amakawa Haruto were to appear in this world, who would you choose between Rio and him?"

"That hypothetical situation makes no sense. Haruto died and became the person you know now."

"Then let's change it again. What if you had the chance to return to Earth before Amakawa Haruto died? Would you leave Rio behind and go?"

"Th-That's...still hypothetical..."

In the end, the question about whether she would pick Haruto or Rio was unchanged. But thanks to Miharu's serious personality, she gave the question careful thought anyway, albeit reluctantly.

"Technically speaking, it's not *impossible*."

Miharu blinked. "Is it possible to go back to Japan?"

"If we can summon you to this world, it shouldn't be that odd for us to send

you back, no? Well, it's about as realistic as finding a single gem in a sandy desert."

"But to go back before Haruto dies..."

"Did you forget? You wandered into this world four years before Amakawa Haruto died. Why wouldn't you assume you'd return before he dies? If you returned right at this moment, it'd be less than a year since you arrived here."

"That's true. But in that case, how could Haruto be reborn in this world before he passes away over there?"

Miharu didn't look convinced. Four years after Ayase Miharu had been brought to this world, Amakawa Haruto had died on Earth. Yet Rio had held the memories of Amakawa Haruto for nine years before Miharu arrived here.

"We'll be going off topic if we continue on the subject of timelines. Just answer my question for now. If you could return to Earth before Amakawa Haruto died, would you choose to do so?"

In short, would she stay in this world with Rio, or return to Earth to see Amakawa Haruto again?

Miharu was about to say something, but closed her mouth.

"See? You can't answer after all. You cannot choose between Amakawa Haruto and Rio."

"Th-That's because Rio's past life is Haruto... I can't think of them as different people."

"But you know deep down, don't you?" Lina asked, voice echoing through the white space.

"Know what?"

"That Rio cannot become Amakawa Haruto. That the two are different people."

Miharu was unable to argue against Lina's words. She hung her head heavily.

"You fell in love with both Amakawa Haruto and Rio. There's no contradiction there. Your feelings are genuine. But you've been unable to move on since the banquet. That's why you cannot choose between the two of them."

Stab, stab. Lina's words were like sharp daggers digging into Miharu's heart.

"That's why your relationship with him hasn't progressed," she concluded.

Miharu's entire body trembled.

"Do you get it? Saying you love both Rio and Amakawa Haruto is like declaring you're two-timing him," Lina said, her words digging into Miharu's heart.

"N-No! That's not—!" Miharu tried to deny that in a panic, but Lina cut her

off.

“I’m not wrong. After all, you can’t choose between the two of them even now,” she said.

“But Haruto has those memories. It doesn’t change the fact he’s Haru-kun’s reincarnation.” Miharu’s voice trailed off weakly.

“No, Rio was born as Rio. Rio cannot be anyone other than Rio—even if he was influenced by his memories of Amakawa Haruto. He said that himself, remember?”

Miharu was completely speechless.

“You feel for Amakawa Haruto while feeling for Rio. As far as Rio is concerned, that’s quite a nuisance—to be constantly compared to another man, that is.”

“Ah...” A strong look of guilt fell across Miharu’s face.

“If things were reversed...if you had fallen in love with Rio regardless of Amakawa Haruto, you would have been able to choose Rio with confidence. A different future could have happened.”

“A different future?”

“A future where you were attracted to Rio without knowing anything about his past life. It was possible. In that future, Rio was in love with you as well. He even told you his feelings.”

“Huh?” Miharu was stunned, unable to comprehend Lina’s words.

“Rio chose you out of everyone. He confessed at the banquet.”

“No way...” Miharu’s breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t imagine such a future.

“It’s the truth. However, that was the same future where Takahisa forcibly took you to Centostella. But even if you were separated from Rio, you would’ve been happier than you currently are, no? Since you’d be able to hog all of Rio’s feelings for yourself,” Lina said with a mean smile in her voice.

Miharu was unable to say anything else.

“But you can’t even decide this one thing.” A hint of disdain could be heard in Lina’s echoing voice.

“Ah...” Miharu flinched.

“Unfortunately, such a half-hearted woman cannot be relied on. Not that Rio would rely on you to begin with. But are you planning on staying in that indecisive state forever? Will you keep waiting for Rio to make a move?”

“That’s...”

“Well, even if he can’t rely on you, he has plenty of other talented girls to

rely on. Like Aishia, Sora, or Celia. As long as you lend me your body when you're asleep, you can continue being excluded from things. Just don't expect a future where you get together with Rio," Lina said coldly. "Are we done now? I have nothing else to say to you, so I'd like to end this conversation."

"W-Wait a minute!" Miharu yelled in a hurry.

"What?"

"I'm not done. I'm... I'm serious too. I really do love the current Haruto," Miharu said, firmly stating her position to Lina.

"So what?" Lina's words to Miharu were still cold and indifferent, but Miharu didn't cower.

"I'm not being half-hearted. I don't know what you're trying to do, but I want Rio to rely on me as well. I want to be dependable. And I'm prepared to do whatever it takes. I don't want to be the only one excluded."

It was rare to hear such clear self-assertion from her.

"Hmm. All right, then. I'll give you a chance. You have control over your physical body, and I can only possess you when you're asleep. We can't communicate like this when you're awake, so it would be helpful to me too if you were more dependable."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, I'll just be watching. I can't believe your word alone—prove it to me through your actions. Show me you can be depended on," Lina said, sounding like she was gloating brightly.

"Fine." Miharu's reply was quiet as she masked her strong will.

"Just make sure you don't go around in circles and cause more trouble for him."

"I-I know that."

Lina's teasing warning made Miharu frown sullenly.

◇ ◇ ◇

While Miharu was talking to Lina in the dreamworld, the Miharu of the real world was in a bedroom of Rio's mansion at the Galarc Castle. Lina was currently controlling her body and using it to speak to Rio. Rio had no way of knowing that Lina was talking to him and the sleeping Miharu in her mental world at the same time.

Lina had pulled out an earring-style magic artifact from somewhere and used it to transform into her original appearance. Using Miharu's body, she had

pushed Rio down onto the bed and straddled him as she gave him three pieces of advice.

“First, searching the labyrinth for clues about what happened a thousand years ago is pointless. If you’re going to look, you should search elsewhere. Second, you should get more disciples besides Sora. If you don’t make new disciples, you may end up regretting it. And the third: In my opinion...the first new disciple you should get is Christina Beltrum.”

The advice was completely unacceptable to Rio, which was why a long silence had fallen over them.

“Well? Will you choose Christina Beltrum as your disciple?” Lina asked, grinning seductively as she straddled Rio.

“That’s impossible,” Rio refused.

“Why?”

“She’s the first princess of the Beltrum Kingdom. She’s responsible for the Restoration and the future of her home kingdom.”

Disciples were the servants of transcendent ones. The moment they became disciples, they were removed from the logic of the world and no longer remained in people’s memories. It was why Rio flatly refused to make Christina a disciple of a transcendent one.

“Right,” Lina agreed easily.

She agreed? So why did she suggest it in the first place?

Rio looked confused. He couldn’t imagine her answering him even if he asked, but he decided to try anyway.

“Will you explain your reasoning?”

“Unfortunately, no. I don’t want to say something that could unnecessarily affect the future.”

“I see...”

“As you should know, it was merely advice. The final choice is yours. You can take what I say with a grain of salt—as long as you consider it seriously.”

“...”

“Well, just keep it in mind for now. Of course, the faster you make a decision, the better.” Lina smiled brightly at the silent scowl on Rio’s face; it was clear that he felt a strong aversion to the idea.

At least she’s giving me time to think. But even then...

There was nothing to even consider—making Christina a disciple was out of the question. He had no intention of making anyone a disciple.

“By the way, you can have a maximum of six disciples. If we exclude Sora

and Christina, you can make another four disciples."

"I thought each transcendent one could only have three disciples?" Rio asked, eyes widening as he recalled what Sora told him.

"You have the divinity of the Dragon King and the divinity I entrusted to Aishia. You currently have the divinity of two people, so you can have the disciples of two."

"I see," Rio replied, but he instantly felt warier.

Don't tell me she wants to create the maximum...

He had felt so repulsed at the thought of creating a single disciple—making five others besides Sora would be entirely impossible.

"We can discuss the other four at a later time. Focus on Christina first," Lina said, as though she knew what he was thinking.

Rio couldn't say yes or no.

"That aside, you retrieved the golem cores, right? Can I have them?" Lina seemed to be done with the topic of disciples, as she swiftly moved on.

Rio pulled himself together with a sigh and used the Time-Space Cache. "*Dissolvo*." The space by his hands distorted, and two transparent orbs that were roughly ten centimeters wide appeared in each hand.

"Thank you. I'll look after this. *Repono.*" Lina uttered a spell, and space distorted once again. The two orbs in Rio's hands vanished.

"You don't have a Time-Space Cache, right?" Rio asked in surprise.

"Correct. I just created something similar using magic," Lina explained simply.

"I see..."

Rio was dumbfounded. The sorcery sealed in the Time-Space Cache was extremely complex. As far as Rio was aware, that spell was yet to be converted to obtainable magic, yet she had done it so easily. It seemed she hadn't been a Wise God in her past life for nothing.

Rio swallowed his surprise and belatedly asked the question on his mind. "But isn't Miharu a spirit art caster?"

Spirit art casters were unable to cast spirit arts if they took any magic spell formulas into their body. Miharu had trained in using spirit arts, so she shouldn't be able to use magic. Since they shared the same body, this should have applied to Lina too.

"That's why I've made her into a sorcerer," Lina said, overturning Rio's assumption.

"You made a spell contract for her? Just when..."

“A few days ago. When she was asleep.”

“Does Miharu know that?”

“She probably hasn’t noticed yet. I can’t be bothered to tell her, so you can explain it to her,” Lina said nonchalantly.

“Can you communicate with Miharu?”

“Only when she’s asleep, through her mental world. I am merely the shadow of Ayase Miharu, so I can only come out like this when she’s asleep.”

“R-Right...”

“So don’t think I can come out whenever I want. In fact, I don’t plan on interacting with any of you more than necessary, so keep that in mind. I’ll be the one to reach out if needed. Just like I’m doing now,” she said with a smile.

“Why?”

“Firstly, this state is really energy inefficient. Miharu has a lot of magic essence, but if I remain in possession of her for a prolonged time, she’ll run out. The time I spend active is time Miharu’s body isn’t resting properly, and simply being in this state is a burden on her.”

“Makes sense.” Rio didn’t want to see Miharu suffer the burden of Lina’s magic casting either.

“The other reason is because I don’t want to be dragged to the forefront to solve problems. I can’t answer most of your questions, and I don’t want to change the future for the worse. Transcendent ones aren’t meant to be so actively involved with the people of this world. You’ll have to explain that to everyone else.”

“‘Aren’t meant to be actively involved with this world...’ Right. I understand.”

Lina’s words seemed to weigh heavily on Rio, as he nodded with a docile look.

“You really have a serious personality, huh? You’re just like the Dragon King was a thousand years ago, even though you’re meant to be a different person.” Lina looked down at Rio with a faraway look, smiling fondly at an old memory.

“I-Is that so?” Puzzled, Rio tilted his head curiously.

“Yes. But in your case, you should just enjoy this moment to the fullest. As long as you’re within this barrier, you’re Rio, not the Dragon King. You have the right to that. After all, even Ayase Miharu acts irrespective of me,” Lina said in a playful tone.

“All right,” Rio said, nodding with a wry smile.

“So, is there anything you wanted to ask me? You won’t have a chance like this often, and as long as it doesn’t affect the future, I don’t mind answering you.”

“Will the golem cores you retrieved be usable again?”

It was a question involving the future right off the bat, but Rio asked it anyway, as he had no idea how tolerant Lina would be to begin with. Lina smiled in satisfaction, seeing through his intentions.

“It’ll take some time, since they’re protected, but eventually,” she answered.

“Who activated the golems?”

“The future may diverge greatly if I tell you that right now, so it’ll need to be a secret.”

The question itself was about a past event, but it seemed the answer would affect the future. Lina refused to speak, hoping to stick to her desired future.

“Got it.”

Rio would have liked to know the answer, but he understood Lina’s conditions. It was information that wasn’t obtainable through other means, so he reluctantly accepted her answer.

“Is there a way to remove an upper high-rank spirit from a hero?” he asked next.

“Unfortunately, no. Spirit contracts fuse the spirit and the human at the soul level. Once the spirit contract is bound, it cannot be broken until the contractee dies.”

“I see... My next question is this—can the masks be replicated?”

It was a rare chance, so Rio asked every question he could think of. Of course, the mask he was referring to was the mask that could bear the burden of the transcendent rules. He had used up a mask in the battle with the golem, so he only had two good masks left.

“The materials are hard to process, so they can’t be replicated right away. You’ll have to make do with this for now. They’re my spares from a thousand years ago. *Dissolvo*.”

Lina recited her spell and took out five new masks. They fell onto the soft bed.

“Thanks.”

“No need to thank me. You’re the one helping me out.”

“This is good, then... Come to think of it, Celia mentioned the atelier underneath the Galarc Castle. When did you make that?”

“I prepared it after the Divine War ended. I knew that the Galarc Kingdom

would be built on this land. And that the golems would attack."

"I heard you were fatally wounded in the Divine War... But you survived?" Rio asked.

"I was wounded to the point where death was inevitable, but I treated my injuries and extended my life just enough to prepare for the future. Even then, there just wasn't enough time, so I couldn't do anything significant."

"What are the underground facilities like?"

"There's a space to control the barrier, a living space, a research lab, and a storehouse. I can even take you there sometime. I plan on taking Celia there again anyway, so I'll make it so that you and your friends can come and go freely."

"Thank you very much. Can I tell this to King Francois? I'm sure he'd want to know what's going on beneath the castle too."

"Yes, that's fine. It's so deep, it won't have any impact on the castle foundations, so tell him not to worry about that. It also can't be accessed without my permission, so it isn't a security risk."

"Got it."

"So, any other questions? I'm giving you a first-time bonus right now, but I might limit the number of questions soon."

"Don't you know what I'll ask anyway?"

Lina once had the power to see the future, so it wouldn't be strange for her to know what would happen in this conversation already.

"The answer is yes. I knew what you would ask me in this conversation all along," Lina said, nodding with a bold grin.

"I see..."

"Do you think it's worthless to have a conversation I've already seen? Or even creepy, perhaps?"

She knew what was going to happen, yet chose to watch without changing things. It was only natural that other people would consider that creepy. In reality, there were even some transcendent ones who had found Lina creepy, but...

"Not at all." Rio shook his head after a surprised pause, smiling gently.

"Why?"

"Information obtained by asking my own questions is completely different from information given without prompting. I can understand the former much better."

"Wonderful answer. There's meaning in having this conversation with you,"

Lina said happily, as though she were praising a well-behaved student. “Besides, it doesn’t take much to change the future. Even the slightest detail of our conversation could change things. At worst, it could even change without my notice.”

Rio’s eyes widened. “Even when you’ve seen the future?” he asked.

“There’s a vast amount of information when it comes to the future. The number of branches is infinite, so information about low-probability futures ends up lower priority—and sometimes slips through the gaps.”

“I see...”

“If a change that shouldn’t exist ends up occurring, it results in a near impossible future. It’s actually pretty common—whenever the conversation deviates from what I know, that’s what’s happening. But while having unpredictable conversations is enjoyable, it’s a different matter for major events.” Lina sighed tiredly.

“And that’s why you don’t want to do anything that could affect the future?”

“Yes, because I don’t know how the future could end up changing either. I dislike creating change, and I’d rather watch silently even if a problem occurs. If I was to deal with something myself, I’d generally do it after the event is over. Of course, there are special exceptions.” Lina grinned cruelly without explaining what those special exceptions would be.

“I understand. I’ll make sure not to blame you for not preventing things you knew would happen.”

It was only natural to want to know about trouble beforehand, yet Rio smiled at Lina without demanding so.

“There are humans who can’t accept that even when they understand why. It’s not so simple, which is why you’re just like the Dragon King.”

What kind of relationship had Lina and the Dragon King had in the past? A memory seemed to flash through Lina’s mind, as she looked down at Rio like she had something to say. But she pursed her lips and swallowed her words.

“I also know where Sendo Takahisa is, but I can’t tell you his location. No, I won’t tell you,” she said in a somewhat bad-tempered, somewhat sullen tone.

“I was just about to ask that...”

“I know.”

Rio let out a strained chuckle. “Of course...”

“You’re too kind to a man like him. He harassed you out of jealousy too. He’s not worth your worry,” Lina said with a sigh.

“He’s still Aki and Masato’s older brother, and Miharu and Satsuki’s friend.”

“I see. Then I’ll tell you enough to avoid affecting the future. He’s doing fine. He eloped with a prostitute and is off having the time of his life with her.”

“Is that...so...”

“You’ll reunite in time. You can also let the others know that for their peace of mind.”

“Got it.” Rio nodded deeply. It helped to know Takahisa was safe.

“All right, then it’s about time I limited the questions. This is the last one I’ll answer freely. The next one will create a lot of derivative questions, so those will be included.”

“I understand. Then I’d like to ask in detail about how those who were summoned here from Earth can return home.”

“There’s a huge difference in the amount of calculations required between summoning and sending. Coordinates, timelines, et cetera, et cetera. There are too many uncertain factors to say for sure, but even if I started the calculations to send them back to Earth right this moment, they’d be lucky to return in their lifetimes.”

“Then...can you start those calculations now?”

“I knew you’d say that, so I already have,” Lina replied casually.

Rio looked pleasantly surprised.

“Thank you very much,” he tried to say, but...

“It’s too early for any gratitude. If they’re unlucky, they won’t be returning in this lifetime. Don’t give them any false hope about actually returning home,” she said in warning.

“Right... Got it.” Rio nodded, expression stiffening. “But I also have information regarding this. It’s about the future on Earth, though.”

“As you would. You lived on Earth as Amakawa Haruto for four years after Miharu and the others were summoned here, after all.”

“Shortly before I died as Amakawa Haruto, I met my mother. When I asked her about Aki, she said she was doing well...”

“Oh, really now? And then?”

Lina reacted as though she had never heard of this before and urged Rio to continue.

“Of course, it’s possible that Amakawa Haruto’s mother was lying. But I was hoping that this means your calculations will finish in the near future,” Rio said, looking at Lina for her response.

“I can’t tell you when my calculations will finish,” Lina emphasized with a smile.

“I know. I’m not trying to probe you for more information.”

He couldn’t imagine himself outwitting her. That was the strong impression he got from their conversation so far.

“Really? I’m happy to accept any challenges.”

“What I’m most curious about is the inverted timelines. Why did I regain Amakawa Haruto’s memories *before* they came here when he died *after* they disappeared over there? It’s always puzzled me...”

It was the question Rio had carried since he first met Miharu and the others here.

“If I tried to explain it properly, I’d have to write a whole thesis.”

“I mean, yes, but...”

What Rio wanted to know was if there was a reason or purpose for it that surpassed logic. He was struggling to put that part in words.

“It’s no coincidence,” Lina said with an all-knowing smile.

“Huh?”

“The fact Amakawa Haruto was the reincarnation of the Dragon King, the fact Ayase Miharu is my reincarnation, and the fact you were born here before Ayase Miharu wandered into this world—all of these things were arranged by me, based on the future I foresaw.”

“I-I see. As I thought...”

He had made a hypothesis based on what Aishia had told him after obtaining the powers of the Dragon King, but hearing it from Lina herself was affirming.

“There was a necessity for all of it. But don’t get the wrong idea—even if the Dragon King and I hadn’t reincarnated, Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharu would have been born anyway. And in every single future, Ayase Miharu would have arrived in this world through the hero summoning. The same goes for Amakawa Haruto dying in a traffic accident at the age of twenty. That future was fixed all along... You could even call it fate,” Lina explained. Their fates were decided regardless of the reincarnations.

“You’ve already figured it out, right? Through our reincarnations, the futures of Amakawa Haruto and Ayase Miharu have been changed. If the Dragon King hadn’t reincarnated, Amakawa Haruto’s life would have ended with the bus crash. If Aishia hadn’t been left as a guide, Rio would have died to thugs in the slums. Amakawa Haruto’s knowledge of martial arts was helpful to Rio. Ayase Miharu would have ended her life as a slave in this world without any intervention.”

“Ah...”

Lina spoke in more detail about the original fates of Amakawa Haruto, Rio, and Ayase Miharu. It was so shocking, Rio was left wide-eyed.

"I'm sure you know already, but the people from Earth have far more magic essence than those born here. That's why Ayase Miharu was very convenient for me to reincarnate as. However, she's still very weak in this state. Without someone to protect her, she would have been caught and enslaved, so she needed someone to protect her. That someone was you, Rio, with Amakawa Haruto's memories. If you didn't have those memories, the future would have been vastly different."

It was more favorable for Rio to have Amakawa Haruto's memories when taking Ayase Miharu into his protection.

Every single detail leading up to now was exactly as Lina pictured a thousand years ago. Rio was speechless.

"Also, the logic behind the reversed timelines is simply the difference between rebirth and teleportation. It's easier to adjust the timeline in reincarnation, which only moves the soul. But what you want to know is why I chose to reverse the timelines, right?"

"Yes," Rio replied in a dry voice.

"It's simple: It was all in order to protect Ayase Miharu after she was sent here. If you were reborn after she arrived, it would have been too late to save her, no? I had no choice but to choose someone born before she arrived here. You fit those requirements perfectly, Rio."

Rio was silent.

"Well? Did that answer what you wanted to know?"

"Yes. But there's one last thing..."

"What?"

"Regarding Latifa and Liselotte... They reincarnated along with Amakawa Haruto. Was there a reason for that?"

Endo Suzune and Minamoto Rikka—was there any significance in why the two who had died with Amakawa Haruto in the bus crash had also reincarnated as Latifa and Liselotte?

"Who knows?" Lina smiled suggestively.

If she's dodging this question, then it means it must involve an uncertain future, right? Rio theorized to himself. But he'd probably know in due time.

"I understand. That's all I have to ask." He obediently stopped questioning it.

"Good boy," Lina said, praising him with a satisfied look.

"It's only because you've answered a lot of my other questions. I've always

wondered why I had Amakawa Haruto's memories..."

The presence of another person's memories existed within him. The fact she had answered his long-standing question about his identity was enough.

"You say that, but you still don't look entirely satisfied."

Lina didn't miss the slight hesitation in Rio's eyes.

"That's...not entirely untrue. But I think the question of who I am should be something for me to answer myself. And I've already reached an answer anyway."

In other words, was Rio still Rio despite having Amakawa Haruto's memories, or was he Amakawa Haruto? At the Galarc Kingdom's banquet, his answer was that he was still Rio. He had told Miharu that he couldn't interact with her as Amakawa Haruto.

Memories of that time resurfaced in his mind, making him look conflicted.

"Are you feeling hesitant over an answer you've already reached because you think that answer was wrong?"

Rio paused for a beat, then shook his head. "No, I don't think I'm wrong. I'm Rio, not Amakawa Haruto," he said firmly.

After all, he had lived all this time as Rio. He had consistently lived as Rio before and after regaining Amakawa Haruto's memories, successfully carrying out his vengeance.

He had made many decisions until now that Amakawa Haruto would never have taken. He had dirtied his hands when necessary. That's why he had tried to distance himself from Miharu during the banquet. Rio himself refused to become Amakawa Haruto.

And so, he wasn't wrong. After succeeding in his revenge and returning to peace, his Amakawa Haruto side had more opportunities to show itself, but...

It's too late to change my mind now. I am me. I cannot become Amakawa Haruto. Rio admonished his swaying heart.

"Indeed. You are Rio, not Amakawa Haruto," Lina said in a gentle tone.

"Right." Rio looked relieved to hear her support.

"However..."

"Huh?"

"No, it's nothing," Lina said, retracting her words.

"How curious," he said with a wry smile, hoping for her to continue.

"Like I said, the Goddess Lina dislikes causing change. And I'm mean," Lina deflected with a mischievous smirk.

"That's right," Rio agreed, staring closely at her.

It's true that you may not be able to become Amakawa Haruto. But there's no doubt that Amakawa Haruto's memories have had an influence on Rio. That's why you're allowed to accept Amakawa Haruto as a part of yourself. If you're able to forgive yourself and wish for it, that is.

In other words, it all depended on whether Rio could go easy on himself or not. The look in Lina's eyes softened kindly.

Well, if that were so easy, he wouldn't have grown up into this stubborn person...

He was a man with self-restraint harder than steel. It wouldn't be easy for him to change, but...

Humans can change. They have that potential within them. They can also cause other people to change. They all have that potential. But telling him that much would be too generous. I don't want to go that far to help that unreliable girl, and he'll have a similar realization soon enough.

She was a mean goddess that disliked causing change. Lina chuckled with glee.

"What is it?" Rio asked, confused by the few seconds of silence.

"Nothing. I'm going to let you off for today."

"Okay..." Rio nodded with a puzzled look.

"I'm going to leave this girl behind, so good luck resting."

Lina gave her short farewell to Rio. In doing so, Rio felt like he had heard something that couldn't be ignored.

"Huh?" While Rio was busy being bewildered, Lina touched the earring-style magic artifact on her ear. Her face blurred like a static TV screen and changed to Miharu's face. Then, the unconscious Miharu fell forward and onto Rio.

"Hey?!" Rio startled, hurrying to catch Miharu's body in his arms.

Sh-She couldn't bring her back to her room?

What a treat. The teenage girl left behind in his bedroom made Rio flustered. The nice scent of shampoo wafting from Miharu's hair only furthered his uneasiness.

He couldn't just leave her sleeping here. Would it be better to send her back to her room before she woke up? For now, this position of them embracing on his bed was very inappropriate, so it was probably best to move her off of him first. However...

"Mm..." Miharu was starting to wake up.

Oh no!

Rio noticed Miharu's breathing had changed. His body stiffened—he knew

he had to roll her onto the bed as soon as possible, but doing so in this situation would result in misunderstandings no matter what.

Rio gave up and lay back weakly, continuing to hold Miharu's body.

"Haruto...?" Miharu opened her eyes and gazed into Rio's face from close up.

"Good morning," Rio said, voice cracking awkwardly as he avoided her sleepy gaze.

"Huh? Um. Uh..." Miharu was bewildered, as though her brain was moving too slow to comprehend the situation properly. But after a quick glance around the room, she realized the position she was in on Rio's bed.

"Wha—?!" She turned so red, it was like her face had been painted. She tried to jump up out of surprise and nearly fell off Rio's body.

"Watch out," Rio said, catching her body and holding her.

"Huh? Um... Wh-Why? Why am I... Is this a dream?"

"You're not dreaming."

"I-I'm heavy, aren't I?! Sorry!"

"No, you're light... But please calm down first. I'll explain the situation, but allow me to move you to the side first."

"O-Okay..."

"Then if you would excuse me."

Gently supporting Miharu's body in his arms, Rio turned to the side. Thus, Miharu went from lying on Rio's chest to lying on the soft bed. The dull creak of the wooden bed echoed through the silent bedroom. Miharu squeezed her eyes shut and trembled like a small animal shrinking in on herself.

"Um...Miharu? Please open your eyes," Rio said in a troubled voice.

"Okay..."

Miharu opened her eyes nervously. She was unable to look at Rio directly and remained red from embarrassment.

"I was talking to Lina. She suddenly visited my room out of nowhere."

Not wanting to make Miharu nervous, Rio stood up and distanced himself from the bed.

Miharu reached out with her hand as though to stop him, but timidly lowered it again with a lonely look. "Ah... I see."

"You're not surprised," Rio said with his back to her.

"I was actually speaking to her in my dream."

"Really?"

"Yes, I had something I wanted to say to her."

"Something to say?"

“About the ki— I mean, about everything!”

Miharu was about to mention the kiss but hurriedly corrected herself. Not even half a day had passed since Lina had taken control of her body and used it to kiss Rio. That memory and embarrassment was still fresh in her mind, making her turn even redder.

“Yeah, a lot happened. She was using your body as she wished just now too.”

Rio could guess how she was feeling. His back was still turned to Miharu, and his chuckle was rather awkward.

“Y-Yes... What about you, Haruto? Wait, did she do something weird again?! She must have, right?! Why was I like that in your bed?!”

“She wasn’t doing anything that weird. Probably.”

“Probably?!”

“We were exchanging information. Although I was the one mostly on the receiving end.”

It was true that they had been talking and sharing information. Rio decided to seal the part where Lina pushed him down onto the bed and tried to seduce him in his memories.

“I-I see. But why were we on the bed?”

“I wasn’t fully recovered from the battle, so I was told to lie down and rest. But when Lina finished speaking, she suddenly returned your body to you, and you fell towards me... So when I caught you, we ended up in that position...”

Rio explained the situation in a terribly awkward tone.

“Also, Lina told me to tell you this—you’re a sorcerer now, not a spirit art caster.”

“Huh?”

“It seems like she made a spell contract of her own accord...which was why you were able to use all that magic.”

“I-I see. Jeez...”

Miharu puffed up her cheeks in a look that was rare coming from her. That being said, Rio still had his back to her, so he wasn’t able to see that. When Miharu realized that too, she felt even more frustrated about Rio not looking at her.

“Um, Haruto,” she said, gathering her courage to call out to him.

“Yes?”

“Could you please look this way?”

“Sure.”

“I really didn’t do anything weird to you, did I?”

When meeting Rio's eyes, Miharu hesitated for a brief moment, then stared him down anyway.

"Yes, nothing like this morning..." he said, referring to when Lina possessed Miharu and kissed him.

"I-I'm sorry about this morning! Please forget what happened!"

"Yes, I've erased it from my memory. What were we even talking about?" Rio feigned ignorance with a strained smile.

"R-Right... That's good, then..."

Contrary to her words, Miharu had an awfully conflicted expression.

Erased from his memory... Is he going to pretend it never happened?

Although it had been involuntary, it didn't change the fact she had kissed the boy she loved. A dull pain ran through her chest at the thought of him pretending that it had never happened.

Is Haruto fine about it? Am I the only one bothered by it...?

Was he that indifferent to kissing her? Or did he actually hate her? Was that why he could erase her from his memory? Despite being the one to ask him to forget, Miharu couldn't help but obsess over what Rio thought of kissing her.

I don't want him to forget.

Even if it had been involuntary, she didn't want him to think it didn't matter. The complex heart of a teenage girl was tormenting Miharu.

Because that kiss was...

Her first kiss.

"What are you talking about? That wasn't even your first kiss."

Lina's words in the dream flashed through Miharu's head.

"I know your first kiss was with Amakawa Haruto, when you were seven years old and Amakawa Haruto was about to move away."

That's right. The first person Miharu kissed was Amakawa Haruto as a child. Not Rio from this world. Besides, Lina had pointed out that her assumption that Amakawa Haruto and Rio were the same person was mistaken to begin with.

Miharu's heart pounded unpleasantly. She couldn't write off her first kiss just because she was a child back then. Her face twisted with guilt.

"Miharu?" Rio approached quietly, noticing her unwell expression.

"Oh, um..." Miharu snapped back to her senses and looked at Rio like she wanted to say something.

Please don't forget it after all.

Those words were on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn't say them out loud.

“Um, I think I’m getting tired...” she said, dodging the question.

“It seems like it. You don’t look very well. Lina said you don’t get any rest while she’s possessing you, so go and have a good rest,” Rio said gently, worrying for her health.

“I’m sorry, Haruto... You should be tired too...” Miharu apologized regretfully. When she called him ‘Haruto,’ she felt a sense of reservation and reluctance she’d never felt before.

Rio tilted his head curiously but gave her a gentle smile. “It’s still early evening, so I’ll get some rest too.”

“I apologize for all the fuss.”

Miharu still looked like she wanted to say something, but she expressed her intention to leave the room. She walked towards the door, but stopped before stepping outside.

“Um...”

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering—should I be calling you Rio instead of Haruto?” she asked out of nowhere.

Rio blinked in surprise. “Why do you ask?”

“Oh, no particular reason...”

“Did Lina say something to you?”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that out of the blue. It’s nothing—good night.”

“Miharu?”

This time, Rio was the one who called out to her, but Miharu hurried out of the room.

Rio, huh...

There must be a reason she suddenly wanted to change how she referred to him. And that reason probably had something to do with Lina, considering the conversation they’d had earlier. Rio considered the possibilities.

“Are you second-guessing an answer you’ve already reached because you think that answer was wrong?”

The question Lina asked him earlier came to mind.

I’m Rio. Not Amakawa Haruto.

That was Rio’s answer.

I know I’m not wrong, but...

Was it because he had kissed Miharu? Amakawa Haruto’s memories kept coming up in his mind, making him question if his answer was truly correct.

Rio was aware that Amakawa Haruto's memories had heavily influenced him. In reality, he had swayed between Rio and Amakawa Haruto multiple times since regaining those memories at the age of seven—especially right after Miharu and the others were summoned.

But even then, he had reached the conclusion that he was unable to become Amakawa Haruto. The greatest impetus had been when he met Lucius in Amande. He didn't want Amakawa Haruto to bear the karma and sins that Rio carried.

Besides, the various moral decisions Rio had made in the past made him reject Amakawa Haruto. It was even possible that the Amakawa Haruto side within was the one doing the rejecting. Amakawa Haruto's values contradicted Rio's, driving him to an identity crisis.

Of course, memories were mere memories. They were extremely vague, subjective things.

So why did an extra set of memories have to cause this much torment?

Having the memories of someone else can be a real pain...

Rio held a hand to his mouth in thought and grimaced.

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Chapter 2: Return to Daily Life

The morning after the golems were defeated, just as the sun was about to rise, an azure sky spread above the Galarc Castle.

In the garden of Rio's mansion, there was a shadow moving swiftly about. It was the mansion owner himself; no one else was in the garden, and it appeared as though he were fighting an imaginary opponent with his bare hands.

He had hidden the fact his body wasn't fully recovered from the effects of assimilation yet, but thanks to everyone worrying about him yesterday, he'd been able to go to sleep early. Because of that, he had woken up early this morning and was now checking his own status.

Feels like I'm at seventy or eighty percent of my best condition.

His current state was somewhere along the lines of feeling fatigue or exhaustion.

My body still feels a little heavy, but it shouldn't get in the way of fighting.

All that was left was to wait and see if the fatigue would fade or if it would remain forever.

I'll have to refrain from strong assimilations until I recover.

According to Lina, it was best to avoid complete assimilation and prolonged durations of assimilation.

Other than that...

Rio came to a sudden stop and activated his spirit arts. Countless orbs of light floated around him. He controlled each one individually, making them move in complex paths around him.

It's gotten a lot easier to cast my arts.

He had been vaguely aware of it already, but his sense for spirit arts was much clearer.

I wonder if this is an effect of assimilation too.

During assimilation, his spirit art ability had been strengthened. The same thing had happened the first time he'd assimilated with Aishia, but the feeling back then had remained after the assimilation ended. The beneficial side effects appeared to be a lucky fluke.

All right.

Rio made the orbs of light he had summoned vanish instantly.

Next up...

He held his left hand before him and began to refine the magic essence. He cast a partial physical enhancement on his left hand only. In this state, he should've been able to punch a boulder without hurting his hand.

"Ugh..."

When Rio wrapped the same light energy around his hand as the light orbs he'd summoned earlier, he frowned in pain. The area covered by the energy was protected as though it were covered by an elastic barrier, but at the same time it exposed him to the light and heat of the energy.

Sora did the same in her battle against the golem, but it really is a huge burden on the physical body. Increasing the degree of enhancement may help enduring it at higher outputs, but...

There was a limit to what a human body could withstand even when enhanced. It was more practical to wrap the energy around a sturdy weapon.

Rio drew his steel dagger with his right hand and sent essence into the blade, wrapping it in energy. But as he increased his output, the metal blade began to chip and crumble from the burden of the energy.

Normal weapons will end up breaking from the burden. It has to be a dwarf-made mythril weapon or a Spirit Arms.

Even then, a mythril weapon wasn't entirely reliable against an enemy as strong as a golem. In reality, the sword Rio had received from Dominic in the spirit folk village had been destroyed in his battle with the upper high-rank spirit possessing Erica.

What's scariest is when the weapon fails to block an attack from a golem-like opponent...

Human bodies were too fragile. A regular human could withstand a blow from a blunt weapon if they used physical body enchantments, but a blow from a golem was instant death.

It'd be a good defense method if I could keep my body constantly wrapped in energy...

Based on his testing just now, the light and heat emitted from the essence energy made it too unrealistic to wrap around his body. It would burn Rio's body as well. If he had to do it, he would be limited to a low output.

If I limit the energy cover to the moment I attack and the moment I defend myself, I should be able to lower the burden, but...

That would require watching for the right timing to release the energy and

would make it no different from defending against the attack itself. What he wanted was a way to defend himself against surprise attacks. Rio continued pondering things.

“Dragon Ki— Ah! Master Ri... Master Haruto! Sorry...”

Sora’s voice echoed through the garden. She had a look of shame on her face from forgetting that she was meant to call him Haruto while they were at the mansion.

Rio sheathed his dagger and smiled at her gently. “Good morning, Sora. No one’s around right now, so it’s okay. Come over.”

Sora hurried over with a skip in her step. “Good morning. You looked really tired yesterday; are you feeling better now?”

“Yeah. I was able to rest the whole night.”

“That’s great! Were you practicing the use of your fighting aura just now?”

“Aura? Do you mean this energy?” Rio looked down at the faint energy he had wrapped around his left hand.

“Yes. Sora calls it ‘fighting aura.’ Sora learned it from the Dragon King a long time ago.”

“I see. I saw you use it during the battle with the golem and wanted to know if I could do it too. I was just about to ask you some things myself.”

“You have questions for Sora? Ask away!” Sora beamed, happy to be of service to Rio.

“Thank you. I noticed my physical body couldn’t withstand the effects of the aura, so I was wondering if there was a trick to it.”

“Right, because human bodies are so fragile. And there’s a limit to how much they can be enhanced by spirit arts...”

“My body gets a bit sturdier when I’m assimilated with Aishia, but I can’t always be assimilated with her. That’s why I wanted to be able to protect myself with an aura...”

“R-Right, you shouldn’t rely on Aishia all the time. Sora will think of something...”

Sora hummed in thought, motivated by her rivalry with Aishia.

“Were you able to withstand such a powerful aura because you’re a disciple of the Dragon King?” Rio asked.

“Yes, Sora has a tough body bestowed on her by the Dragon King! Sora doesn’t even need to materialize her dragon body to use auras!”

“How sturdy is your body in its unguarded state?”

“Even without physical enhancements, Sora’s body is the hardest thing in this

world. Sora can't be hurt by any physical object. All magic and spirit arts are repelled, and no amount of flames can leave any burn. But the Dragon King was stronger, of course," Sora said proudly.

"That's impressive." She had the appearance of a cute little girl with squishy cheeks, but Rio had witnessed her exchanging blows with a golem. Would it even be possible for him to hurt her if he enhanced his body and threw a punch? Perhaps he'd just end up hurting his own fist instead.

"Not as much as the Dragon King!" Sora replied, grinning happily.

"We've gone off topic. I'll try different things and see if there's a good solution. I don't know how much I can withstand while assimilated with Aishia yet either."

"S-Sora will help think! Um..."

Sora tilted her head in a cute gesture, still motivated by her one-sided rivalry. Rio watched her with a smile as he resumed controlling the aura wrapped around his left hand.

After a small pause, Sora let out a sound of realization.

"Ah! Come to think of it, there was another caster that could use auras during the Divine War."

"Really?"

"Yes. They could fight pretty well for a human. Sora remembers being a little surprised to see a human using auras. And when the Dragon King saw him..."

Sora tilted her head again in an attempt to retrieve her memories of that time. She grumbled wordlessly for a few more seconds.

"He said something about how it was like casting a barrier—doing so would lower one's offensive power, but in return, it would allow a human to safely use an aura..." she mumbled hesitantly.

"Like casting a barrier, lowering one's offensive power..."

Rio looked as though a light bulb had gone off in his head.

"S-Sorry, that wasn't very helpful. Um, the Dragon King said one normally wouldn't cast such a barrier... Since it didn't look any different to a normal aura, Sora lost interest immediately..."

Sora added to her vague explanation with a regretful look.

"No, that was a great hint. I think I've got an idea... Let me try it. Normal essence barriers are cast like this, but..."

Rio held his right arm forward and activated his spirit arts, creating a barrier of energy. The barrier could be physically touched just like the aura, but there was a difference between them too. And that difference was...

The aura has heat, making it more dangerous to touch the more powerful it gets. But the barrier is simply solid. No matter how solid it is, it can be touched safely.

Besides, the same energy could have different appearances. Barriers involved spreading the energy like a solid block or wall, while auras were the release of energy that flowed like liquid light. Rio clenched his hand lightly and knocked on the wall-like barrier before him.

"I was caught up in the preconception of deploying a barrier like a wall. All I had to do was release a barrier in the same way I release an aura. Like this."

Rio erased the barrier in front of him. He replaced it with light energy wrapped around his right hand. It looked no different than the aura.

"Ooh!" Sora cheered happily.

"It looks the same. I think it's a success."

Rio attempted to wrap the normal aura around his left hand and compared them. They looked the same at first glance, but he could see a difference if he brought them closer to his face.

The light of the aura around his left hand was blazing hot enough to leave burns, while the swaying light around his right hand had no heat to it.

"Since I don't have to use my essence on the heat, it's more efficient than normal aura. But like the Dragon King said, my offensive power will probably go down a bit," Rio surmised.

It was pretty simple once he gave it some thought. His preconceptions of controlling energy like photon bullet magic or light orb spirit arts had prevented him from thinking of barrier spirit arts.

"Wonderful!"

"Considering it has to be used at the same time as physical enhancements and other spirit arts, auras really are difficult to use. But the benefit of protecting one's body is significant."

A caster would require a lot of skill to reliably maintain an aura. But as long as the barrier wasn't attacked with something stronger than the barrier, the caster would practically be invincible to external attacks.

It might be good to wrap it around myself when using flying spirit arts.

He normally created a protective coat of wind while flying, but it wasn't very dependable as a defense when flying at high speeds. If he could protect himself with a sturdy barrier armor, he might be able to completely erase the risk of any flight accidents.

No, hold on.

Rio frowned as though he had suddenly remembered something. He kept the barrier wrapped around his right hand and made the energy aura disappear. In its place, he cast a raging wind and compressed it around his left hand.

I was using wind spirit arts to make something similar to auras already.

The destructive power of the swirling storm was only directed outward, so there was no damage done to Rio's left hand. There was still a risk of him hurting himself if he mismanaged his arts, but it was safer than using the energy aura.

Water can also be wrapped around the body rather safely. Covering the face would result in suffocation, so that would require some care. Earth spirit arts could use sand and pebbles to make a good barrier. But that may obstruct vision...

He considered the various ways one could use defensive auras for each element.

On the other hand, fire, lightning, and ice are out of the question. Just like the normal energy aura, simply wrapping them around oneself would cause damage. But they'd be great attacks.

There were some elements that weren't suited to defense.

Maybe it would work if I used the regular aura as a protective coating, then cast an elemental one on top? But in that case, using regular fire and lightning spirit arts seems enough...

If it required wrapping his body in an energy aura, his casting efficiency would be lowered. Rio stared at the two arts wrapped around his hands as he considered his line of thinking.

"Dragon King?" Sora called, peering up at his face curiously.

"I was thinking about how elemental spirit arts could be wrapped around the body like an aura. But the regular energy aura seems the simplest to handle." Rio dispelled the arts around his hands.

"Yup! It's easiest to just throw an aura over your punch. Pow pow!" Sora struck a cute fighting pose and swung her fists like she was shadowboxing.

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Just then, Latifa's voice echoed through the yard. She ran up to them and threw herself at Rio.

"Onii-chan! Sora!"

"Whoa, there! Good morning." Rio caught her gently.

"Tee hee. Morning!" Latifa rubbed her face on Rio's chest happily.

"You're full of energy today."

"Of course I am. It's because you're here!" Latifa looked up at Rio's face, moving her head at an angle as though begging to be petted.

"I see," Rio said with a smile, petting Latifa's head. It was like they had returned to their past routine.

"H-Hey, Suzune! How long are you going to cling to the Dra...to Master Haruto for?!" Sora snapped, lashing out at Latifa.

"Hopefully forever," Latifa said with a smitten expression.

"No way! Master Haruto is in the middle of his morning training. Do not get in his way. Shoo!"

Sora puffed up her cheeks angrily and shook Latifa's body from behind. It should have been easy for Sora to pull Latifa away with her physical strength, so the fact that she wasn't doing so meant she was either being reserved, or she wasn't truly upset.

"What a raucous morning."

Latifa wasn't the only one who had come to the garden. A group with Sara, Orphia, Alma, Gouki, and Komomo was also approaching, with Satsuki in the lead. They all had wooden training weapons in their hands. The sun had just risen in the sky.

"Good morning, everyone."

Rio greeted them with a smile, eyes squinting as though he were blinded from the brightness of the sun.

"What a lovely morning it is today."

"Yes, it's the perfect weather for training!"

Gouki and Komomo gazed at the morning sun pleasantly.

"Hey! I want to join the morning training too!" Masato shouted from the mansion, belatedly running over to join them.

"You managed to wake up today, Masato," Alma said with a giggle.

Masato rubbed his nose with an embarrassed grin. "Heh heh! It's been a while since Haruto's taught me."

"We want to spar with Haruto too."

"Yes. Looks like there'll be a line today."

Orphia and Sara were also looking forward to training with Rio.

And so, the garden that had been silent just moments ago was suddenly bursting with activity.

“It really is great to have Haruto here,” Satsuki said cheerfully, watching everyone surround Rio.

“Hmph...”

Sora hid herself behind Rio, her shyness triggered by the sudden crowd.

“And so, please spar with me, Haruto!” Masato restlessly pleaded. He couldn’t help his excitement.

“Sure, let’s do it.”

Rio also seemed to be happy to be sparring with Masato again, agreeing readily.

“Yay! It’s nice that I’ve received a Divine Arms from becoming a hero and all, but I was never taught how to use a two-handed sword. I was hoping you could teach me!”

In the past, Masato had learned how to use a sword and shield from Rio. But his Divine Arms was a two-handed sword that had a long reach even considering his future growth, so it was no surprise he was struggling to settle on a combat style.

“Sure. Then let’s start a mock fight first. I just want to see how you move, so there’s no need to enhance your physical body. I’ll use a one-handed sword and shield.”

“Okay!”

Thus, Rio and Masato were to begin sparring. Rio prepared a training sword and shield, while Masato equipped a two-handed training sword specially made by Alma to match his Divine Arms. They moved a short distance away from everyone else and faced each other.

“Ready to begin? You can move first.”

“Got it.”

Rio was relaxed, while Masato was a little nervous in comparison.

“There’s no need to be nervous. You haven’t learned how to fight yet. Just show me how you fight with an unfamiliar weapon in your current state.”

“Right!”

Masato took a deep breath and started running towards Rio. There was a size difference between the two of them, but Masato had a longer reach on his two-handed sword. Masato accurately ascertained the moment Rio was within his reach and made a large but swift swing of his sword, but Rio saw the path of his

blade and avoided the attack by slightly shifting his feet.

"Hah!"

Masato resolutely continued to swing at Rio without giving up. Rio swung his sword and shield in return, dealing with Masato's blows using the minimum amount of movement.

"Swords swung with two hands tend to result in large movements. Their trajectories are also more limited than one-handed swords because of the way the human body is structured. This makes your movements easier for an opponent to predict, and unless there's a large difference in ability, your attacks will be evaded like this. Do you get that?"

"That's the thing! I should have the advantage of reach, yet...!"

Masato agreed with Rio's advice while swinging his sword.

"Understanding the reach of your opponent compared to yourself is good. But that alone isn't enough. Two-handed swords are weak when you need to be on the defensive. Of course, your opponent will also try to fight at their ideal range..."

It was at this point that Rio shifted from defending to making a counterattack. He waited for the moment Masato swung his sword horizontally to lower his stance and close the distance between them, deflecting Masato's sword from below with his shield.

"Ugh..."

Immediately after that, Rio's sword pointed at Masato's throat.

"You cannot afford to let people reach your weak point so easily. You have to focus on stopping your opponent from outside their reach."

Masato nodded happily. "Right."

"It looks like you've learned how to hold a sword, swing a sword, and the general basics already."

Rio lowered his sword and backed away.

"Princess Lilianna's knight, Hilda, taught me a little. The experience I got from your one-handed sword lessons helped."

"I see. Then I'll give you a thorough lesson on what kind of sword swings leave openings for your opponent. I'll be attacking you back from here on."

By doing that, Masato would naturally learn what kind of swings to avoid.

"Heh heh, bring it on!"

Masato laughed happily, and they resumed sparring.

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Ten minutes later...

“Ah, I’m beat! It feels good!”

Having finished his training with Rio, Masato was sprawled on the ground in a corner of the garden. He had been running around while swinging a large sword, so he was sweaty and out of breath. In contrast, Rio returned to where everyone else was with a refreshed look.

“All right, can you face me next?” Satsuki asked, seeking to swap in for Masato. They had used rock-paper-scissors to decide the order they would face Rio in while he was fighting Masato.

“Of course. But are you sure? Your wounds may have closed, but you were gravely injured just yesterday...” Rio said, worrying about Satsuki’s condition.

Although wounds could be healed through magic and spirit arts, the pain lingered for some time afterward. That’s why it was recommended she rested for another day or two, but...

“Yeah. Everyone must be really good at healing, because I feel perfectly fine. Like my body’s gotten lighter and I’m brimming with energy.”

Satsuki swung her short training spear energetically.

Her assimilation with her upper high-rank spirit progressed after the fatal wound yesterday... Rio thought while staring at Satsuki.

“If you’re sure, then okay... But let me know if it starts to hurt,” he eventually said.

“I could say the same to you, Haruto. I heard you were exhausted after the battle yesterday.”

“Aha ha. Well, I was able to get a good night’s sleep...”

“I slept well too. So there’s no problem.”

“Then let’s give it a go first,” Rio said, putting down his sword and shield and picking up a wooden bastard sword instead.

“Yup, let’s go.” Satsuki nodded cheerfully and started walking towards an easy spot to spar. Rio followed right behind her.

“Let’s allow physical body enhancements in our fight. Low-power arts are also permitted.”

I want to see how much the assimilation affected her, Rio thought as he made his suggestion.

“Sounds good.”

“Gouki, can you act as a referee?” Rio asked, thinking that their match could get intense.

“Gladly.”

Gouki followed after Satsuki and Rio as well. Thus, after distancing themselves enough from the others, they stood facing each other with their weapons held at the ready.

"Begin!"

Rio and Satsuki began sparring.

"Hah!" Satsuki started running at the signal, charging towards Rio. The distance between them vanished in an instant. But her speed appeared to be faster than even Satsuki herself had expected, as she had a look of surprise on her face.

"Whoa!"

Instead of crashing into Rio, Satsuki diverted her route to the side and swung her spear while passing Rio. The decision to deviate to the side was made on the spur of the moment, so it was impressive that she could still time an attack like that. Fortunately, it also served as a feint against Rio.

But Rio had swung his sword to slash at Satsuki as she passed. Wooden weapon clashed against wooden weapon, creating a clamorous sound. Immediately after, Rio fired a weak bullet of light at Satsuki's back. It was a follow-up attack that was aimed perfectly at her blind spot.

"Wha—?!"

Satsuki whirled around with a gasp and mowed down the light bullet with her spear. It was proof her senses were sharpened right now.

"Oh?" Gouki murmured in awe.

"Jeez, you really don't know how to go easy on someone," Satsuki said, protesting with a grin.

"Well, you seemed to be in as good of a condition as you said."

Even if he had directly hit her, the bullet only had the speed and power to hurt like a rubber ball.

Satsuki nodded fearlessly. "Right? Even I'm surprised!"

She resumed running at Rio, this time striking with her short spear from the front.

Her physical enhancement has indeed improved from before.

Rio chose to stop moving and receive Satsuki's blow directly. At the moment of impact, he leaped back a little to stifle the force of the blow.

Her power has increased too. There's no mistaking it, he thought as he landed.

"Heh heh! Today is the day I'm going to win!"

Satsuki grinned brightly and closed in on him at a rapid speed.

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Two more hours passed, during which Rio faced not only Satsuki, but all different kinds of opponents.

“I couldn’t win against Haruto today either. Or Gouki, or anyone else...”

In the end, as training wrapped up, Satsuki was unable to strike back against Rio. Gouki had faced her too, and she hadn’t been able to beat him either.

Gouki laughed heartily. “Ha ha ha. I won’t be losing yet.”

“I thought I’d win at least once today...”

“Your physical enhancement was powerful, but it was like you were unable to keep up with the movements of your body.”

“Hmm. I see.”

Satsuki tilted her head and hummed at Gouki’s advice.

“But you were truly amazing today, Satsuki. Either one of us could have won our match,” Sara said, commending Satsuki’s growth.

As warriors of their village, Sara and the spirit folk girls had received combat training from a young age, placing them one step ahead of Satsuki. Sara also had better physical abilities due to being a werebeast, which Satsuki struggled against, but Satsuki’s physical body enhancement had helped her put up a good fight.

“Your physical body enhancement has gotten much stronger.”

“Did you figure out the trick to it?”

Orphia and Alma both questioned Satsuki.

“The trick to it... I guess you could say that?”

Satsuki didn’t seem to understand the change that had happened in her body, as she merely tilted her head curiously.

Looks like she’s noticed something’s different.

Now that Rio knew about the relationship between heroes and upper high-rank spirits, he couldn’t keep the information hidden forever. It’d be better to explain things sooner rather than later. That was the thought that passed through Rio’s mind as he looked at Satsuki’s profile.

“That aside, Sora was really impressive. I was shocked,” Latifa said, praising the smaller girl. She had invited Sora to spar with her earlier. Sora had refused because she considered it a bother but had eventually given in to Rio’s request. As a result, Sora had deftly handled Latifa with a single finger.

“Of course. Sora is the second-strongest in this world after Master Haruto.”

“But Aishia is just as strong as Onii-chan.”

“Hah. Sora’s far stronger than the likes of Aishia.”

“Really?”

“Yes. The last time we fought, Sora came out on top,” Sora said triumphantly. Meanwhile, Masato and Komomo joined the conversation.

“Over Aishia? I guess you did fight amazingly yesterday.”

“Please spar with me next time!”

“In reality, how strong is she?” Sara asked from a short distance away, as she approached Rio.

“Strong enough that I don’t even know. There’s no doubt she can fight on more than even terms with Aishia.”

Sora had definitely fought seriously against the golem yesterday, but it was unlikely she had used absolutely all of her strength. She’d had to suppress some of her power to prevent unnecessary damage to the city.

“She’s a strong ally,” Orphia said, giggling as she watched Sora.

“Good grief. It’s too annoying to take you all on one by one, so the three of you can come at Sora together!”

Latifa, Masato, and Komomo were pestering Sora for another match. Sora was too shy around people to act honestly, but her reply showed she wasn’t entirely displeased.

“Yes,” Rio agreed happily as he watched over Sora.

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After finishing morning training, they all washed up in the bathroom of the mansion and headed for the dining hall.

“Man, I’m starving!” Masato said, entering the dining hall noisily.

Miharu and Sayo were right in the middle of setting the tables. Gouki’s wife Kayoko and their attendants were there too.

“Hey, Masato! Don’t run in the dining hall. What if you bumped into someone?” Aki, who was helping set the table, warned him with a sullen pout.

“Oops. Sorry, sorry,” Masato said while scratching his cheek.

Just then, Rio entered the dining hall with Latifa and Charlotte on each arm.

“Princess Charlotte, why are you pressing against my brother’s body so much?”

“Oh, I’ve been feeling dizzy since this morning, so I’m having Sir Haruto escort me.”

“If you’re not feeling well, shouldn’t you be resting in your room? Don’t

push yourself.”

“Oh no, I wouldn’t get any proper nourishment by skipping breakfast. Besides, aren’t you clinging to Sir Haruto too, Lady Suzune?”

“Because I’m his little sister!”

It was the usual composition of Latifa puffing up her cheeks and Charlotte looking like she was enjoying herself. Rio had a strained smile on his face, unable to move.

“That’s enough! Both of you get away from him!”

This time, Sora had also joined the fray. She had been too awed to cling to Rio, which allowed Latifa and Charlotte to get a head start on her.

Aishia came over and grabbed Rio’s right hand. “Haruto, let’s sit at that table.”

“A-Aishia! Release Master Haruto’s hand! It’s Sora’s duty to lead the way. This way, now!” Sora grabbed Rio by the left hand, stubbornly unwilling to lose to Aishia.

“All right, all right. I get it already. Let’s all sit at the same table,” Rio said, finally taking charge of the situation that was getting out of hand.

Just then, Sayo hurried over and tried to muster the courage to join the circle of Rio and the girls.

“U-Umm, may I join you too?” she asked.

“Of course,” Rio said, nodding with a smile. He then greeted her by name. “Good morning, Sayo.”

“Good morning, Sir Haruto.” Sayo’s eyes sparkled with happiness.

“Let’s all sit over there then. Come on, Onii-chan!”

Thus, Rio sat at a table with Latifa, Charlotte, Aishia, Sora, Sayo. Meanwhile...

Onii-chan, huh...

Aki was watching Rio and the others from a distance. She frowned with a conflicted expression, having heard Latifa call Rio “Onii-chan.” Many things—many, *many* things were flashing through her head.

At the banquet held by the Galarc Kingdom, Rio had explained to her that he had the memories of Amakawa Haruto. That’s why she had cooperated with Takahisa’s sloppy plot to kidnap Miharu. She had been in the wrong; Aki now understood that.

However, Aki hadn’t met Rio face-to-face since the banquet. Of course, she had seen him after the fight with the golem yesterday, but she had been too awkward to say anything other than a brief greeting.

She didn’t know how to interact with the person who had her former brother’s memories. That’s why she was trying to avoid having to talk to him by keeping her distance.

But when she was in the same space as him, she couldn’t stop following him with her gaze. When she looked at Rio and Latifa, she understood. No, she was forced to understand; it was thrust in her face.

In his mind, Latifa is his little sister...

Rio’s little sister was Latifa. Not Aki, who was Amakawa Haruto’s little sister. The sibling bond she had never been able to build with Amakawa Haruto was being built by Latifa and the person who had Amakawa Haruto’s memories.

I don’t get it.

Aki pursed her lips sullenly. She hated Amakawa Haruto; she didn’t know the reason behind her parents’ divorce, but watching her mother suffer had caused her to feel resentment. Aki had only been four years old back then.

Of course, she had realized those feelings were irrational as she grew older. But even then, she’d hated him. She still hated Haruto even now.

But Rio, with his memories of Haruto, was the person who had saved her life. Latifa was still a great friend who treated her exactly as she did before. Aki couldn’t imagine herself hating the current Rio. When she saw Rio and Latifa being such close siblings, a complex emotion rose within her.

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When will my brother come back...?

To take her mind off Rio and Latifa, Aki thought of Sendo Takahisa.

Thanks to Sara's sharp senses, the castle's search team was able to identify the inn Takahisa had stayed in. That had been the day before yesterday. According to the report, the search team was to ask Takahisa to accompany them to the castle as soon as he returned to the inn.

But there had been no news about Takahisa yesterday. Wasn't it weird that he hadn't returned by now? They may have been distracted by the golem attack, but that shouldn't mean there should be no report at all.

Did something happen?

For example, was Takahisa in danger? A vague sense of anxiety filled Aki. But if something *had* happened, it would still be strange not to receive a report about it.

He would have remembered Haruto too, right? What would he do then?

Takahisa had already left the castle because he was hurting over Miharu. If he had regained his memories of Rio, he would be even more hurt.

But maybe he's already back at the castle. I'll ask later.

Lilianna should be coming to the mansion as well today. Perhaps she would give them an update before Aki could even ask for it. With that thought, Aki pulled herself together.

However, Aki noticed one more person who was watching Rio from a distance: Miharu. She was looking at Rio with an expression between envy and vexation.

She should just join them at their table.

Just what was she holding back for? She was the one who had decided after the banquet to stay with him because she loved him. She had finally regained her memories of Rio too. Aki pouted unhappily.

Is she still bothered by the fact she kissed him?

Yesterday, Miharu had looked embarrassed the entire day. But today, she looked different than her usual self. Instead of looking shy, it was more like she was lost in her own thoughts or brooding over something,

Miharu said she had the soul of a god from this world in her, so maybe...

Was that what she was worried about? Aki looked from Miharu back to Rio.

But in that short amount of time, Rio had left his seat. She couldn't see him anywhere.

Huh?

Aki looked around the dining hall.

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“Good morning, Aki,” Rio said to her.

Aki flinched before returning the greeting. “G-Good morning...”

He had apparently gotten up to help set the tables. There was a tray in his hands, and Latifa was with him.

“Say, do you want to eat at our table, Aki?” Latifa asked.

Aki froze for a brief moment, then turned down the invitation with an awkward smile. “Oh. Sorry, I promised Miharu I’d eat with her.”

“Okay...” Latifa frowned in disappointment, then glanced up at Rio, who was standing beside her. Rio seemed to be holding back his words in front of Aki, as he was only watching over the two of them.

“Then let’s have lunch together,” Latifa said, taking a step forward to invite Aki to lunch instead. This time, Aki was the one who glanced at Rio’s face—and ended up meeting his eyes.

“What do you say, Aki?” he asked, smiling a little hesitantly.

“Sure, if it’s with everyone else...”

A shadow fell over Aki’s expression as she nodded. She had added the condition of “everyone else” to avoid having to eat with just the three of them. Either way, it was clear that Aki was feeling awkward.

“It’s a promise then!” Latifa said in a gentle tone, with a friendly smile on her face.

“Yup. See you later.”

Aki bid farewell to Latifa with a slightly uncomfortable look, then bowed to Rio. She then headed over to Miharu to invite her to eat breakfast together.

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In the later hours of the morning, Rio and Charlotte greeted a visitor at the mansion. It was Lilianna, the first princess of the Centostella Kingdom. Miharu, Aki, Masato, and Satsuki greeted her at the entrance of the mansion.

“I have an update on Sir Takahisa,” Lilianna said, immediately getting down to business.

The way her expression was slightly stiff suggested that it wouldn’t be good news. Aki and the others picked up on that hint, and their expressions hardened as well.

“Siblings and friends, please gather in the drawing room. If possible, you too, Lady Sara,” Charlotte said, requesting Sara’s presence.

“Sure, I don’t mind.”

Thus, Rio moved to the drawing room with Miharu, Aki, Masato, Satsuki, Lilianna, Charlotte, and Sara. After everyone settled into their seats, Charlotte gave a brief summary of the situation.

"To get straight to the point, the search team has lost track of Sir Takahisa's whereabouts."

No one was particularly surprised, as they had been somewhat expecting that. But a heavy silence still fell over the room. Eventually, Aki broke the silence in a hoarse voice.

"Wh-Why? I thought you found the inn he was staying at?" she asked.

"He apparently never returned to the inn."

"That can't be right..."

"After interrogating the owner of the inn, it was discovered that Sir Takahisa had caused trouble with a certain organization in the red-light district," Charlotte explained hesitantly. It was clear from her expression that she was unsure if she should tell them everything as it was.

"Allow me to explain," Lilianna said, taking over from Charlotte. "Sir Takahisa murdered a man who operated a brothel—and eloped with one of the girls who worked there."

An even heavier air filled the room. The expressions of Miharu and the others froze like ice. They had never expected him to kill someone.

"Why...?" Aki choked out. Her gaze was unfocused, as though she was unwilling to accept reality or unable to understand what was being said.

"No witnesses have been found yet, but the assumed motive is that he did it to protect the girl."

Perhaps there was still hope for him, as he hadn't done it out of despair or self-interest, but no one could open their mouths.

So that was the blood I smelled when we visited the brothel...

Sara recalled the fresh blood she had smelled in the alleyway beside the brothel when she'd joined the search team and frowned bitterly.

Meanwhile, Charlotte resumed her explanation of events. "The organization behind the brothel has been furiously searching for him to exact revenge. Sir Takahisa and the brothel girl were hiding in the aforementioned inn, but they had already been caught by the organization by the time the search team got there."

"Caught...? So where is he now?" Masato moved his dry lips and asked.

"We believe he is alive."

Everyone looked slightly relieved.

"However, we still don't know his whereabouts."

“You mean you don’t know where they’re keeping him?” Satsuki asked.

“We know where he was held captive: in the hidden facility beneath the brothel. It seems there was illicit business being conducted there.”

“And he’s not there anymore?”

“No. Apparently there was a large scuffle within the facility... The basement of the brothel is now completely burned down.”

“Burned down...” Satsuki’s face twitched intensely.

“That pillar of fire,” Masato mumbled quietly.

“Yes. Yesterday morning, a large pillar of fire rose just before the golems attacked the castle. It’s almost certain that it was caused by Sir Takahisa. Just before the pillar rose, someone fitting Sir Takahisa’s description was witnessed leaving the brothel with a girl,” Charlotte described.

“My brother burned down the brothel—the whole building?”

“Yes,” Lilianna answered without hesitation.

“Then...does that mean my brother...killed a lot of people?” Masato asked. His face was twisted bitterly, as though he was enduring the pain of a toothache.

“I’m told there were many casualties,” Lilianna confirmed solemnly.

“After everything he said about not killing people...”

Masato bit his bottom lip and clenched his fists. Aki, Miharu, and Satsuki were all silent in thought. Then, as though to relieve them of some of their torment...

“All the casualties were members of the organization conducting the illicit business. The girls working at the brothel were all released before the building was burned down,” Charlotte added.

“Still... Argh! Jeez!”

He had just been informed his brother was a murderer, so it was only natural for Masato to lose his composure. He ruffled his own hair roughly as all kinds of emotions ran through him. His face was clearly saying he didn’t get what was happening.

“And Takahisa went missing afterward?” Satsuki asked after taking a deep breath to calm herself, urging them to keep going.

“Yes. There were no witnesses after that, leaving the search team at a loss. So we were hoping to borrow Lady Sara’s strength once again.”

Charlotte nodded curtly and looked at Sara.

“I just have to go to the scene and follow his scent, right? Leave it to me,” Sara said, willingly cooperating with the search.

“Thank you very much. Please help us out,” Charlotte said, and the others all

bowed their heads at Sara.

"It's nothing to thank me for! I'm only doing what's right," Sara said, shaking her head with a troubled look.

"Furthermore, it seems Sir Haruto has a report to make regarding Sir Takahisa. I haven't heard the details yet myself."

"Most of it is the same, but I've also received information regarding Takahisa's safety. My source of information is the Wise God Lina," Rio added.

"Huh? Isn't Lina the one inside Miharu?" Satsuki asked, looking at Miharu.

"Was it yesterday...?" Miharu recalled how Lina had used her body to visit Rio's bedroom yesterday.

"Yes. I was given a short message to pass on. She has the power to know the future, so I believe she should be a reliable source."

"What did the goddess say?"

"She wouldn't tell me his location, but he's apparently doing well. In her words, he's having fun with the girl he eloped with."

There was no mistaking the faint look of exasperation that crossed Satsuki's face.

"I-If she knows the future, why won't she tell us where he is?!" Aki yelled.

For Aki, the situation was as grave as a matter of life or death. If Lina knew the future, then she should know his current location, she rationalized.

"She can't say anything that would change the future, apparently," Rio said apologetically.

"That can't be..."

Aki closed her mouth in frustration. In reality, it was only natural to want to ask for the location of a missing family member from the person who knew where he'd gone. It would be more unreasonable to ask her to suppress her emotions. The fact that she was able to hold her tongue was probably because she still had reservations about Rio—or the source of information, Lina.

"Lina said that we would reunite in time. She asked that you accept it for what it is for now..."

Rio added Lina's words to comfort them.

"I'm fine with that," Masato suddenly said.

Aki looked at him with wide eyes. "Masato?"

"He's alive. We'll see him again someday. That's enough for me for now."

It seemed Masato had found his own resolve. He let out a deep breath, crossed his arms, and sat deeper in his seat.

Aki looked like she wanted to say something to him but pursed her lips as

though stuffing her emotions away.

Chapter 3: Behind the Daily Life

Stewart Huguenot was the eldest son of the Huguenot family, one of the three ducal families of the Beltrum Kingdom. He was also the former heir of the family.

He had been disinherited after an incident in Amande where he had gotten drunk and caused trouble for Rio, which in turn had angered his father, Duke Huguenot. Now, his little brother had taken over the position of heir, and he was just a low-ranking knight of the Restoration.

It was the middle of the day at the Galarc Castle.

“Hah...”

Stewart was on duty patrolling the castle grounds. In contrast to the sunny sky, his sigh was heavy and gloomy. He couldn’t help feeling listless. Every time he passed the Galarc knights on patrol, that feeling increased.

The reason behind that feeling was Stewart’s inferiority complex towards the Galarc knights.

“Guh...”

A weak and cowardly knight that fled from Rodania as it fell. He couldn’t help the feeling that all the Galarc knights were thinking that as they sent him looks of disdain. Thus, each time he came across a knight of Galarc, he sped up his walking pace.

This is humiliating. Why should I be doing this as a high-ranking noble?

Even the knight uniform of the Restoration was embarrassing to wear. The reason he felt this way was probably because he himself would think the same if the positions were reversed.

Wouldn’t it have been better to stay in Rodania as a prisoner of honor?

Such thoughts flashed through his mind.

No, there’s no guarantee they would have kept everyone alive.

He recalled the battlefield at that time and immediately corrected himself. When the Arbor army was attacking, Stewart had been on duty protecting the city. But when he’d witnessed Renji use a single attack to freeze over a hundred Aerial Knights, he’d completely lost the will to fight. That was when he had decided to evacuate on an enchanted airship. If he were to return to that moment

now, he would still choose to evacuate.

Besides, I'm the oldest son of the Huguenot family. Who knows what would have happened if the Arbors had caught me...

His justification for fleeing was his family's status. He convinced himself out of self-interest that he couldn't be captured as the heir of the Huguenot family.

However, that decision was now spurring on Stewart's sense of guilt. With every passing moment, he questioned whether his decision was truly correct.

"Brother."

Just then, someone called out to Stewart mid-patrol. Their voice had a mocking tone to it, as though they were looking down on him.

"Pierre." Stewart turned back to look in disgust at his younger brother, Pierre Huguenot. Though only a second son, he'd gained the right to succeed the Huguenot family after Stewart had been disinherited.

"How unsightly. As a member of the Huguenot family, you should be walking with your head held high. What are you so ashamed of?" Pierre asked, seeing right through to the inferiority complex Stewart was carrying. It seemed they weren't brothers for nothing.

"What did you just say?"

"If you had died in the fight in Rodania, you would have at least regained the honor you lost." Pierre sighed scornfully.

Damn it! He's just saying whatever he wants!

Stewart closed his mouth but cursed him on the inside.

Things had been better in the past. At least up until the incident that had allowed his brother to take the position of heir from him. Even when they'd been unable to stay in the capital due to the faction wars, he'd still had his pride as the heir of the Huguenot family.

But now that he had been disinherited, he didn't want to meet foreign nobles anymore. He didn't feel any pride in the uniform he wore. His younger brother looked down on him, and he couldn't even argue back. At this rate, he was just a failure, of which his little brother made him extra aware every time they spoke. That was why Stewart hated interacting with Pierre.

However, Pierre was just airing his grievances with Stewart, who had abused him back when he was the heir, and returning the favor with interest.

"Father knew all along. You claimed to be guarding the evacuees, but you were just trying to save yourself by fleeing on the enchanted airship."

"Wh-What?! Don't be ridiculous! I would never!" Stewart stuttered, losing his composure from Pierre hitting the bull's-eye.

“Well, I knew you didn’t have the guts to die honorably to begin with. At the end of the day, you’re still a member of the family, so I suppose it’s better than you getting captured.”

“Tch! Did you come all the way here to pick a fight?”

Realizing that extending the conversation would just create more stress, Stewart held back his anger and asked his brother for the purpose of his visit.

“No, father is calling for you.”

“What? Father...calling for me?”

Ever since he had been disinherited in Amande, Duke Huguenot had barely spoken to him. Thus, while he tilted his head in suspicion, there was a tone of joy to his voice.

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In the guest house within the Galarc Castle grounds, Stewart and Pierre were visiting Duke Huguenot’s office.

“Father, I’ve brought him,” Pierre said as he entered the room.

“Good work. Pierre, you can return to your own duties.”

“Yes, father.”

Pierre nodded obediently at his father’s orders. But he didn’t like the thought of leaving his father alone with his disinherited brother, so he shot Stewart a warning glare on his way out.

“Pfft.” Stewart chuckled triumphantly.

“What are you laughing at?”

“N-Nothing. What did you need from me today?”

Duke Huguenot’s cold voice had Stewart pulling himself together in a fluster. But his eyes had a faint light of expectation as he watched his father’s expression, hoping he had good news.

“Four years ago, you participated in an outdoor drill at the academy. Do you remember that?” Duke Huguenot got right to the point, pulling a curtain over the light in his son’s eyes.

“Huh? Outdoor drill? Four years ago...” Stewart’s eyes darted about the place at the unexpected question.

“The drill where you caused trouble. Don’t tell me you forgot.”

“N-No, of course I remember...”

There was no way he would forget. When he looked back on his past, that outdoor drill had been the start of his father’s disappointment in him.

However, he was offended by the accusation that it was *he* who had caused the trouble. While it was Stewart who had bumped into Flora and sent her over the cliff, Stewart himself had been sent flying into Flora.

I was a victim too!

He had no responsibility for the situation. At the very least, that was how Stewart saw things, and it was also how the aftermath had been handled externally. So why...

"Why are you bringing it up now?" Stewart asked nervously.

"What was the name of the boy at the center of the outdoor drill incident?" Duke Huguenot asked, ignoring his son's question.

"If I recall correctly...it was Rio."

This name was also unforgettable to him. After all, merely recalling it filled him with hatred. He was a lowly orphan, yet he stood out all the time, always had an air of superiority to him. He was like a plague of a boy, Stewart recalled with a frown.

That's right. If he hadn't been there...

Flora would never have fallen off the cliff.

In reality, it was another male student who had collided with Stewart. Stewart had been injured by the monster ambush and had tried to cling to another male student in a panic during the battle. As a result, Stewart had been thrown into Flora, sending her off the edge of the cliff. That was the truth.

However...

He pushed me, and Princess Flora was entangled in the result. It wasn't my fault.

Stewart had used his father's power to twist the truth. Thus, all the blame went to Rio. At this point, even his own memories and perception had been twisted by that truth. Merely recalling Rio after all this time was enough to make him annoyed.

"I see..." Duke Huguenot said after a long pause. Then...

"Uh..." Stewart's whole body trembled. Duke Huguenot was staring at him so coldly, his gaze could be mistaken for killing intent.

But in the next moment, Duke Huguenot closed his eyes in thought.

Was it just my imagination?

Stewart tilted his head blankly.

"That aside, you weren't in the rooftop garden during the attack yesterday, were you?" Duke Huguenot asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"Yes, I had just been on night patrol..."

“I don’t care about that. I’m asking if you saw Sir Amakawa fight.”

There was a hint of exasperation in Duke Huguenot’s tone, believing Stewart had just been hiding inside the castle. Whether Stewart himself realized that...

“No, I was extremely tired after my night shift, so I was asleep... I didn’t see anything.”

“It should have created quite the commotion,” Duke Huguenot said with a disappointed look.

“M-My apologies.”

“Forget it. I have a meeting with Queen Christina after this. You’re coming with me.”

Duke Huguenot got up from his chair while giving Stewart his orders.

“Huh?”

Stewart blinked blankly. His father never took him with him anywhere anymore.

“I told you to follow me.”

“M-Me? R-Right away!” Stewart replied in an excited voice. Could there be a chance for him to regain his position in the discussion with Christina? Hope filled his eyes once again.

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On the same floor of the guest house, Stewart was accompanying Duke Huguenot to Christina’s office as his guard. Christina and Duke Huguenot seated themselves facing each other, while Stewart stood behind his father. Vanessa was also present as Christina’s guard.

She’s as beautiful as always...

The beauty of Christina, the pride of the Beltrum Kingdom, left Stewart captivated.

After Stewart had been disinherited and fallen to the rank of an ordinary knight, Christina was now far out of his reach. They’d once been members of the same squad for the academy’s outdoor drill, yet now he barely had the opportunity to see her from afar, much less meet her face-to-face.

When was the last time he had seen Christina this close?

She’s nothing like those cheap girls that can be bought with money... The average noble lady could never compare. Her grace and her charm are on another level.

Stewart was being affected by Christina’s fragile and refined atmosphere.

How long had it been since he'd last seen a woman like this? Stewart gulped, swallowing the urge to pin her down and have his way with her.

"What a rare sight. You don't normally bring your son around with you." Christina glanced at Stewart before giving Duke Huguenot a questioning look.

"There's a lack of personnel these days. He's accompanying me as my guard," Duke Huguenot explained curtly.

So father really is planning on promoting me?

Hope swelled within Stewart. As Christina had said, Duke Huguenot rarely ever brought him around anymore. Having Stewart accompany him to an important one-on-one meeting like this was almost unthinkable.

This was related to Duke Huguenot's careful nature—whenever something important was going on, he would try to avoid getting as many unrelated people involved as much as possible.

Even Stewart's younger brother Pierre, who was currently working as Duke Huguenot's trainee secretary, was barely allowed to attend any important meetings. Yet the same Duke Huguenot had brought Stewart to this meeting with Christina.

"Heh..."

It was no wonder Stewart felt he was being treated favorably. After being banished to the shadows to constantly feel pathetic about himself, all the conditions were fulfilled for Stewart to be even more elated. He puffed up his chest proudly at the attention Christina was giving him.

This is it. This is how a noble of a duke house should be.

This was the stage above the heavens that only a select few of the highest-ranking nobles were allowed to step on. The feeling of returning to that stage filled Stewart's heart with pride. However...

"I see. Very well. So what business did you have today? I have a meeting with King Francois after this, so I'd appreciate it if you made it quick."

Christina immediately lost interest in Stewart. Although she seemed curious about why Duke Huguenot was doing something he didn't usually do, she had deemed it a waste of her time to pursue the thought. She figured Stewart wouldn't be there if it wasn't a topic he couldn't listen to, so she asked about the purpose of the meeting.

"While it isn't extremely urgent, there is a matter I wish to discuss with you sooner rather than later. It's about the future of the Restoration."

"Let's hear it."

"First, regarding Haruto... I mean, Sir Amakawa and the strange phenomenon

surrounding him. Up until yesterday, we had absolutely no memory of him..."

"This *is* related to the future of the Restoration, yes?" Christina shot Duke Huguenot a look of mixed exasperation and wariness at the sudden, seemingly unrelated topic.

"Yes. It just so happens to involve him. Which is why I want to know what happened to him. Is there anything you can share with me?"

"I was told he was cursed by a nasty ancient artifact. We were only able to regain our memories of him thanks to this barrier around the city, which neutralizes the effect."

Christina had already heard about what had happened to Rio from King Francois yesterday. Other than the residents of Rio's mansion, only Francois, Christina, Flora, Lilianna, Liselotte, and Aria were aware of the truth.

However, out of all the transcendent ones, the Wise Gods were viewed as religious deities in the Strahl region. There was a condition to sharing the information, and that was to receive Rio's direct approval before informing any third parties. It had even come with the threat of losing the Galarc Kingdom's trust, thanks to King Francois.

That was why Christina feigned an emotionless look as she lied; this was the explanation she had discussed and decided on with Francois and Lilianna beforehand. In this world, there were a vast number of magic artifacts—far too many to keep track of, which was why most unnatural events could be dismissed as the effect of an ancient artifact.

"An artifact's curse, you say? I have heard of interesting artifacts that can affect the mind and memories of a person before..."

"Do you not believe it?"

"It's not that I don't believe it, it's just that the area of effect is far larger than I can believe... Almost to a nonsensical degree."

It was only natural for him to be dissatisfied by this explanation. However, the truth was even more nonsensical. Being told that their memories weren't being controlled by an artifact, but by the rules of god would be even harder to believe.

"I don't blame you. I'm confused too." Christina agreed with Duke Huguenot with a genuinely troubled smile. "But it actually happened. And we have no reason to doubt Sir Amakawa," she added with a serious look. Those words alone made it clear that Christina had absolute faith in Rio.

"Of course. I'm not suspecting him of anything."

"Then what is it?"

“I merely did some light investigation into the reactions of those around us. To my surprise, there were a large number of people who hadn’t realized they had lost any memories to begin with.”

“So it seems.”

Christina had already heard of how the people in the castle had reacted to Rio. Those who had no interest in him or had barely interacted with him hadn’t even noticed that their memories of him had been missing. They didn’t pay Rio any mind to begin with, so the empty space in their memories had no effect on them. He was no more than a passing thought to them.

In contrast, those who were greatly involved with Rio were deeply impacted by the return of their memories. They also felt the blank interval in their memories much more keenly. The prime subjects of this were the residents of Rio’s mansion and those who had witnessed the battle on the rooftop garden.

“You were aware? Take Stewart, for example. He didn’t witness Sir Amakawa’s fight yesterday.” Duke Huguenot glanced at Stewart over his back.

Is that why he brought his son?

Christina also looked over at him.

“Stewart. You remember Sir Amakawa, yes?”

“Yes, I remember him...”

Stewart nodded with a grimace. He couldn’t forget even if he wanted to. Haruto Amakawa was the reason he had tasted bitter hardships in Amande. Stewart considered him the culprit behind his disinheritance. However, that didn’t mean he thought of Rio around the clock.

“You should have lost your memories of him too. Did you feel anything odd regarding that?”

“No. It’s not like I think about that g—that man on a daily basis, so I never noticed...”

Glossing over the fact he nearly said “that guy,” Stewart gave his answer with a dissatisfied look.

“As you can see, there are some people who never noticed their missing memories.” Duke Huguenot stopped looking at Stewart over his shoulder and turned back to Christina.

“I understand that, but get to the point already. I don’t see how this topic connects to the future of the Restoration,” Christina said, returning her gaze to Duke Huguenot to question the direction of the conversation.

“There is a connection. We need to know what kind of obstacles may get in the way of inviting him to the Restoration.”

It was already clear that the main subject was inviting Rio.

“I believe I previously asked you to drop the idea,” Christina said with a tired look. She probably had an inkling of how the conversation would go from the moment Rio was mentioned.

“But you should be well aware of the precarious situation we’re in.”

Duke Huguenot’s words were uttered with a sincere urgency. His strong determination and refusal to back down easily could be glimpsed.

Father...

Stewart gazed at his father’s back in wonder. The topic was much more serious than he had been expecting.

“Of course, I know.”

“It isn’t just a lack of personnel or finances. We have no hope. No future. We’ve lost Rodania, and the evacuees separated from their family are filled with fear. I don’t want to fear the worst, but if this situation drags on, people may be tempted to defect. The survival of our organization is at risk.”

“I know that. That’s why I declared my accession earlier than planned.”

In reality, Christina’s declaration to ascend the throne had received favorable reactions from the members of the Restoration. However...

“It’s true that your declaration helped relieve some of the members’ worries. But it only bought us a little more time. At this rate, your legitimacy will be denied at the coronation. When that happens, the situation I fear will come true.”

The declaration made with the regalia should never have been used as a stopgap. It had been their trump card—a hand they should have saved to use at the most effective moment to defeat the Arbor faction.

“I know we need a plan to improve the situation... Our people need hope,” Christina agreed, but her face still looked reluctant. Using their trump card meant they had no more effective hands they could play.

“Indeed, we need hope—a tangible hope that can be seen with our own eyes. A strong hope that can create a path for us through the darkness.”

“And you want Sir Amakawa to be that hope.”

“Word of his valor has already spread far. Even without being on the rooftop garden, many witnessed yesterday’s fight from afar. The entire castle knows that Sir Amakawa was the one who defeated the monsters. He’s also renowned for beating the King’s Sword, Alfred, which has great meaning for us. Now imagine if he assisted the Restoration.”

Naturally, the members would feel hope again. They would place their expectations on Rio.

"..."

Duke Huguenot's desire to cling to Rio was understandable. His point was convincing. But Christina remained silent. It was apparent that she was passive about—or rather, flat out refusing—to invite Rio.

But even then, Duke Huguenot stayed firm.

"The members of the organization will have hope. I believe he could be able to retake Rodania for us all by himself. He could lead our way," he said, speaking eloquently.

"You wish to entrust our future to someone unrelated to us?"

"We merely need to create a relationship with him."

"Another marriage of convenience? You know he has no interest," Christina said, tired of repeating this conversation.

Rio was already surrounded by attractive members of the opposite sex. There was no room for the noble ladies of the Restoration to cut in line. The only one who had a chance—and probably the best chance at that—was...

"There's Celia, no?"

"Even so, it's not our place to say anything." Christina maintained her passive position with a frown.

At that, Duke Huguenot finally showed signs of impatience. "We don't have the leisure in this situation. Celia is a member of the Restoration. It doesn't have to be marriage either—she just needs to appeal to Sir Amakawa for his assistance. The fact that she isn't doing that already is one problem, but the fact that you won't order her to do so is another," Duke Huguenot argued emotionally.

"I would never do such a thing," Christina said, brows furrowing in clear disapproval.

"Why not?"

"What does Sir Amakawa have to gain from helping us? It would be shameless of us not to offer an appropriate reward."

"We can ask him what kind of reward he wants, no? Why don't you do that?"

"I've tried to probe into it before. As a result, I realized there was nothing we could offer him. He doesn't have many desires—you should know that too."

"Nevertheless, we've never invited him to formal negotiations as an organization. Even if it fails, it's worth a try. We should at least approach him and ask for his cooperation."

Both sides presented firm arguments as they debated. Although he was up against his direct superior, Duke Huguenot wasn't showing any reserve today.

I had no idea father could be so zealous...

Stewart quietly held his breath as he watched his father argue with Christina.

Are our prospects really that bad?

Of course, he was aware of the Restoration's precarious situation as well. But his vague impression was made much more real by the sight of his father—the organization's number two—arguing so heatedly.

Christina, who had been so passive about requesting Rio's assistance, fell silent in thought with a troubled look. She could imagine the situation improving dramatically with Rio's assistance. It was true she didn't have any better ideas either.

Duke Huguenot grew tired of Christina's silence and pressed her for an answer. "Your Majesty, I wouldn't be urging you this much if there were other ideas. We don't have the time to be considering nonexistent options. Is there a reason we cannot even *ask* Sir Amakawa for his assistance?"

"Sir Amakawa is still suffering from the effects of his curse. Even if we were to receive his assistance, we will forget him as soon as we leave the barrier," Christina argued bitterly.

"But that shouldn't be a hindrance to receiving his help. We'll remember him again if we return to the barrier, no?"

The downside was an inability to coordinate with their own army outside of the barrier, but their strategy wouldn't have involved using Rio in a group anyway. They wanted him for his outrageous power as an individual. If he could use that power for their army, it wouldn't matter if they couldn't coordinate with him during the mission.

"There is another reason. You saw how he wore a mask when he was fighting, right?"

"Yes."

"Without that mask, Sir Amakawa is unable to fight outside this barrier."

"Is that another part of the curse?"

"Yes. If he fights without the mask, he'll lose his memories of himself," Christina said, explaining the reason for her reluctance.

"That does sound like a problem..."

But Duke Huguenot hummed, not looking entirely convinced.

"The masks break as he's fighting due to the effects of the curse. And he only has a limited number of them."

"It sounds like we should be able to receive his assistance if we offer a reward on par with the mask he has to use up."

“Theoretically, yes.”

“Is there another perspective I’m missing?”

Duke Huguenot didn’t let up on his questioning. With the future of the organization on the line, he spoke his mind frankly.

Christina was unable to reply immediately, falling into an unsettled silence.

“I can’t help but feel like you’re keeping something from me. It’s a feeling I’ve had for some time now. Whenever Sir Amakawa is the topic, you seem to draw an emotional conclusion first and make up a logical excuse afterward.”

Duke Huguenot pressed the matter further, cutting off any chance of her dodging the question.

“I just don’t want to cause him trouble.”

The look in Christina’s eyes darkened out of guilt over Rio.

“Is that *really* the only reason?”

For some reason, Duke Huguenot sounded nervous after coming this far. He showed the first sign of hesitance since the meeting started.

“What do you mean?” Christina asked, tilting her head dubiously.

“You don’t want to cause him trouble. I see, I understand. But that doesn’t seem like the only reason to me.”

“So what is it?”

“That’s what I’d like to know...”

Duke Huguenot looked down and muttered to himself bitterly. He then noticed Stewart standing behind himself and almost looked like he was about to turn around.

Father? Stewart wondered to himself.

Just then, the hourly ringing of the castle chimed.

“Your Majesty, it’s almost time for your meeting with King Francois,” Vanessa whispered in Christina’s ear.

“Sorry, but as I said in the beginning, I have an appointment with King Francois. Sir Hiroaki will also be in attendance, so we’ll have to continue this conversation another time.” Christina sighed as she wrapped up their talk.

“I will visit again in a few days.” Duke Huguenot sighed heavily as well and left the room.

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Immediately after exiting the room...

“Stewart.” Duke Huguenot came to a stop and addressed his son. However,

he did not turn around.

"Y-Yes?"

Stewart couldn't tell what kind of expression was on his father's face. However, he *had* witnessed the fierce argument with Christina just now, so his reply was nervous.

"Forget what you heard in the room," Duke Huguenot ordered in a cold voice. He still did not turn around.

"Excuse me?" Stewart's reaction to the sudden order was delayed.

"Your reply?"

"Y-Yes!" Duke Huguenot's irritated voice startled Stewart into nodding immediately.

"Don't do anything else," Duke Huguenot added, voice still devoid of all emotion other than resentment.

"Huh?"

Stewart couldn't make heads or tails of what he was saying, but Duke Huguenot started walking back to his office on the same floor without saying anything else. Stewart quickly chased after his father. They soon arrived at the office, where a visitor was waiting for them.

"Ah, good timing. I thought I had missed you and was about to leave."

The visitor was a middle-aged man of large stature. There was also a guard beside him.

"Why, if it isn't Duke Gregory."

Duke Huguenot's eyes widened at the unexpected encounter. Clement Gregory was one of the leading nobles in the Galarc Kingdom. Before Rio became a transcendent one, Saint Erica had seized the capital of his territory.

"I apologize for the unannounced visit, but I had some pressing matters to discuss with you. Is this boy with you?" Duke Gregory looked at Stewart.

"My son, Stewart."

"Hello. Pleasure to make your acquaintance." Stewart brought his right hand up to his chest and gave him a knight's salute.

"My, how dependable."

"Not at all. I'm ashamed to say he has no claim to the title despite being my eldest."

"Guh..." Humiliated by his father, Stewart trembled in shame. Duke Gregory looked at him and smiled.

"No, no, he looks like a wonderful son."

"Thank you. Now, you said you had something to discuss?"

“Yes, preferably off the record.”

“Of course. Please, come in.” Duke Huguenot invited Duke Gregory into his office. He then turned to his son.

“Stewart, return to your post.”

“Yes!” Stewart replied respectfully and returned to his patrol.

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After Duke Huguenot’s secretary prepared tea and left the room...

“I heard your queen is about to have a meeting with our king,” Duke Gregory said as though he was making small talk.

“Yes, I’m surprised you know.”

“The hero of our nation, Lady Satsuki, is also attending along with the new hero, Sir Masato. So is Princess Charlotte of our kingdom, and Princess Lilianna of the Centostella Kingdom. On top of that, Amakawa, the one at the center of all this commotion, will be there too.”

Duke Gregory’s eyes narrowed slightly. He seemed to have an opinion on the attendance list, and in particular, Rio.

“Oh?” Duke Huguenot’s eyes widened.

“Oh, were you not aware?” Duke Gregory asked pointedly after seeing that reaction.

“Not of the full list of attendees, no... It seems like quite the grand gathering.”

“Yes, who knows what will be discussed with all the heroes gathered there.”

“I haven’t heard anything either...”

It was indeed an interesting gathering. Duke Huguenot hummed to himself.

“It’s not good having so many secrets. They said they weren’t going to discuss anything major, but that appears to be a clear lie.”

Duke Gregory shook his head in disapproval.

“Indeed, I wish they would hide things better if they wanted to keep secrets. Otherwise it just feels like they’re telling us to our face that they don’t trust us.”

It would be one thing if it only lowered motivation for a short period of time, but for an ongoing cooperative relationship, mutual trust was essential. It would be terrible if the dissatisfaction grew to the point of losing even the minimum level of trust, leaving only resentment.

“I completely agree. Sharing information is proof of trust, after all. Such poor lies will only lead us to suspect something unfavorable to us is going on. As their

chief vassals, I do wish they'd trust us more."

Perhaps it was because of his own experience, but Duke Gregory's words carried not only empathy, but his own dissatisfaction.

Well, it's not like I'm demanding to be told everything. I have no intention of asking for information unrelated to me, and I understand that there are some things that need to be kept confidential. I do the same to those around me.

It was fine there was information that couldn't be shared—what was important was to make that clear without trying to evade the question. Sometimes, not sharing information could be proof of trust as well. At the very least, that's what Duke Huguenot personally believed, and he tried to put that into practice as much as possible.

"Especially when the matter concerns oneself. Avoiding the question, changing the topic and speaking in circles...then being annoyed when asked for clarification? It's inexcusable," Duke Huguenot agreed. The latter half of his words also appeared to be based on his personal experience, as he had a glimpse of a bitter frown on his face.

"Bwa ha ha! Why does that sound so familiar to me? It seems we've both suffered a lot." Duke Gregory laughed heartily.

"So it seems," Duke Huguenot said with a chuckle.

Having exchanged lighthearted complaints as business talk in lieu of greetings, they formed a feeling of camaraderie.

"While I would love to drink the night away with you while discussing such things, let us leave that for another day. I came here to discuss something serious today."

"You mentioned it was a pressing matter..."

"Yes, and one I would like to keep between us."

"Understood. What is it about?"

Both dukes stiffened in expression and stared at each other warily.

"I was actually reluctant about accepting this duty. But you're familiar with the association of nobles across kingdom borders, no?" Duke Gregory presented an oddly roundabout preamble.

"Does this involve the Beltrum Kingdom's nobility?"

"As I expected, you're an astute one. You see, one of my relatives married into a noble family of your nation. I've received a message from a certain person."

"Oh?" The look in Duke Huguenot's eyes sharpened at Duke Gregory's words. Never mind the person in question, what exactly could the message be?

“There is someone who wishes to meet you in secret.”

“Requesting to meet me when I’m affiliated with an enemy faction doesn’t sound too peaceful.”

If the fact that he had met someone in secret was made public—no, even if the fact that he *tried* to meet someone in secret circulated as a rumor, it would be quite bad. It wouldn’t be a surprise if he was branded as a traitor.

“You would both be nobles of the same kingdom, worried about the kingdom’s future, no?”

“It all depends on how you say it. Bringing up something like this could put your own position at risk, Duke Gregory.”

“That’s why I’m here meeting you one-on-one. I have nothing to fear as long as you stay quiet.”

“You’re crossing a line,” Duke Huguenot warned.

“My apologies. My aforementioned relative was begging in tears, you see. I felt the need to fulfill my obligation to them, so please forgive me. Don’t get me wrong—I am merely a neutral party. I have no idea what they wish to discuss with you, and it won’t be my concern whether you choose to meet them or not,” Duke Gregory said, emphasizing his neutrality, but it was clear that Duke Huguenot was wary.

Is it a trap, or a defection? Either way, they’ve made a move to throw me off-balance. But approaching me in this way means...

He had expected there to be traps to split the Restoration, but he was surprised to see he was the target. If this was a trap, it was most likely an invitation for him to betray Christina and defect to the Arbor faction.

It wouldn’t be strange for other nobles to be targeted already. This is why I’ve been telling her we need to make the first move...

In order to prevent these kinds of situations, they needed Haruto Amakawa’s reputation. Yet Christina was still hesitating at this late stage. Duke Huguenot bit his lip in irritation.

With such an unclear future ahead of them, it would be no wonder if people started defecting. If Duke Huguenot was being shaken as one of the leaders of the organization, the nobles at the bottom would be even more agitated.

What if there were nobles lining up to accept the secret meeting? Would it be better for him to accept the meeting just to see what the other party was up to?

No, that’s out of the question. I would never...

Before he knew it, Duke Huguenot felt like he was standing at a crossroads with no way back. He swallowed his breath nervously.

“I’m sure you’ll need some time to consider. You may give me your reply at the meeting that will surely be held about our future with the Beltrum government...or at the very latest, the coronation ceremony.”

Duke Gregory gave him a deadline for his response. There was a thin smile on his face, as though he was enjoying Duke Huguenot’s distress.

“I can’t give a reply without knowing who the other noble— No, never mind. I will pretend we never had this conversation.”

Duke Huguenot refused the offer firmly. He pressed his right hand over his eyes as though holding back a headache—or keeping away the fog of hesitation hanging around him.

“Very well.”

Duke Gregory nodded easily, looking unaffected by the reply. Thus, the secret discussion between the two dukes came to an end.

◇ ◇ ◇

While Duke Huguenot was finishing up his secret meeting with Duke Gregory, heroes and royalty alike gathered in King Francois’s office in the castle.

Satsuki, Masato, Hiroaki, Charlotte, Lilianna, Christina, and Francois were there, along with Rio and Aishia—in fact, it was Rio who had called them all there. His purpose was to explain everything regarding upper high class spirits and heroes to them. Sara, Orphia, and Alma, who were deeply acquainted with spirits, were in attendance as well.

Rio and Aishia were the only ones standing as they gave their explanation. Yesterday, during the meeting they had held for the residents of the mansion after the battle, details about the heroes and upper high class spirits had been obscured on purpose. They only explained the situation to the royalty of each nation prior to explaining it to the heroes themselves.

First, they revealed that heroes had upper high rank spirits in them, and that those spirits were constantly assimilated with them. Sara and the other spirit folk were shocked to learn that the upper high rank spirits that had been missing for so long had been right near them. However, they held their tongues, since the explanation was being held for the sake of the heroes.

“Assimilation with an upper high rank spirit...” Satsuki muttered, looking down at her body curiously as she remained seated.

“The six upper high rank spirits were called the transcendent ones along with

the Dragon King and Seven Wise Gods. They were beings that protected this world. Satsuki has a wind spirit, Hiroaki has a water spirit, and Masato has a contract with an earth spirit."

"Contracts are made through mutual agreement. It doesn't feel right having that choice taken away from me," Satsuki said with a pout of disapproval.

"Well, it happens all the time in fantasy stories."

"I know, right?"

Hiroaki and Masato accepted it easily.

"I guess it's because you're boys," Satsuki said with a tired sigh.

"Ha ha. We also know someone who's got a contract right near us. Haruto and Aishia have a contract too, right? Sara and the others too," Masato said, looking at Rio, Aishia, Sara, Orphia, and Alma.

"Right. But now we know there are two types of contracts with spirits. The normal spirit contract with a shallow link, and the stronger spirit bond. Sara's group has normal spirit contracts. The one the other heroes and I have is a spirit bond," Rio said.

"What's the difference?" Masato asked.

"Like I already said, they can assimilate with spirits. They can also use Spirit Arms...the Divine Arms that heroes can create. Aishia."

"Yeah."

At Rio's signal, Aishia turned into her spirit form and vanished. Immediately after, they assimilated, and Rio's Spirit Arms—a sword—materialized.

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Hiroaki's eyes widened. He had seen Aishia vanish during the battle with the golem, but he hadn't known she was a spirit, so he was shocked.

"Wow!" Masato's sparkled with pure admiration at Rio's sword.

"This is my assimilated state with Aishia. In this state, my physical body becomes tough, and my ability to manipulate spirit arts increases too. My self-regeneration also improves, so I won't die easily from wounds. The more we increase the degree of assimilation, the more this effect increases. The reason heroes can control such strong powers is because of this assimilation." Rio looked around at everyone as he listed the merits of their abilities.

"Based on that explanation, there's no difference between you and me..." Satsuki said sagely. "Are you sure you're not a hero too, Haruto?"

"No, being able to make a Spirit Arms doesn't make me a hero. There is another reason heroes are called heroes." A faint shadow fell over Rio's face.

"We can both assimilate and create Divine Arms. Is there a difference between us?"

"There is. The difference is in the spirit bond I have with Aishia, and the spirit bond you have with your upper high rank spirits. That difference is what makes you heroes." It was clear from Rio's expression that the difference wasn't a good thing.

"And what exactly is the difference?" Hiroaki asked, staring at Rio.

"Whether the contract was made with the spirits' consent."

Everyone except the royalty gulped nervously at Rio's ominous answer.

"The upper high rank spirits were all forced into their contracts with the heroes against their will."

"Why?" Satsuki asked hesitantly.

"During the era of the Divine War, Six Wise Gods sought the assistance of the upper high rank spirits to defeat the demons. However, their negotiations failed. I don't know the details myself, but it seemed they tricked them. The Six Wise Gods created a subservient sorcery system in order to unilaterally use the spirits' power. That is the hero system."

Rio explained the secret of the heroes' birth.

The three heroes of the current era all had conflicted looks on their faces.

"Isn't that kind of awful of the Six Wise Gods?" Satsuki said, giving her honest opinion.

"Are you sure you should be saying that? They're the gods worshipped across Strahl, no?"

Hiroaki glanced over at the reactions of the royals in the room, worried they

were discussing a dangerous topic.

"It definitely can't be publicized," Francois said calmly. "I was informed of this in advance, but it was Haruto who requested this meeting so that the heroes could be informed of this issue. I hope you can all swear to never speak of this to anyone else."

Hiroaki glanced at Rio's face and ruffled his own hair as he nodded. "All right. I'd rather stay away from religious problems anyway."

"Let's get back to the topic. The answer to if I'm a hero is no. Only those with spirit bonds with the six upper high rank spirits are heroes," Rio said, revealing the definition of a hero.

"But there's no difference in what you can do compared to us, right?" Satsuki asked.

"If you just look at my abilities, I guess."

"Sounds like there's something else..." Satsuki stared at Rio's face.

"As I've already said, the problem is the will of the spirits. Even at this very moment, the upper high rank spirits crave freedom from the restraints of their bonds. If I say that much, you should be able to piece together the rest."

The heroes must have imagined the spirits sleeping peacefully within them. They all stiffened as they looked down at their own bodies.

"The spirits want to annul their spirit bonds with the heroes and free themselves. But that isn't possible, as the Six Wise Gods have cast a powerful seal to prevent them from surfacing."

"We can't break the contract even if we want to?" Satsuki asked.

"Unfortunately, no. The spirit bond fuses the human and spirit at a near soul level. Once the spirit bond is formed, there is no way of breaking it—unless the contractor dies," Rio said, hesitantly but clearly.

"I see..."

"Aishia and I can freely cancel our assimilation, but the heroes cannot. You're constantly forced to be assimilated with the spirits."

"So that's one thing you can do that we can't," Satsuki said.

"Yes. Because this involves all of you so closely, I want to explain the demerits of assimilation too," Rio said as preface. "Think of it as becoming a being that is both nonhuman and human while you're assimilated with your spirit. If the degree of assimilation gets too strong, you really may cease to be human. The effects of this are unknown. At worst, you might be unable to return to being a human."

"So it's an ability boost with risks."

Hiroaki seemed to find that rather cool, as he had a fearless smirk on his face.

"My hair and eye color permanently changed as a consequence of a powerful assimilation. My body also suffers strain relative to the degree of assimilation afterward."

Hiroaki's face stiffened faintly when he heard about the actual changes to Rio's body.

"I don't know what will happen if I continue to assimilate with Aishia, and I might just be lucky I've gotten away with this much until now. The heroes are constantly in an assimilated state, so please don't think about increasing the degree of assimilation. Weak assimilation seems to have no effect on the physical body."

"Is it possible to lower an assimilation after raising it?" Satsuki asked worriedly.

"I believe there's a limit set to prevent you from raising your assimilation degree too high, but I don't know how far you can change the degree yourself. Aishia and I can communicate freely, so we can adjust our assimilation degree, but the heroes can't..."

"But that ice hero named Renji in Rodania had a stronger assimilation than us, right?" Hiroaki asked with a frown. During the retreat from Rodania, Kikuchi Renji had taught him a harsh lesson. He was probably recalling that moment.

"Ah, him. Yes, most likely. He seemed a lot more familiar with combat than the last time I saw him, and his skills were much better too."

"Tch..." Hiroaki clicked his tongue bitterly.

"So there is a way, right? For us to change our assimilation degree," he asked Rio.

"H-Hey, didn't you just hear what Haruto said? It's dangerous to raise the assimilation degree!" Satsuki scolded Hiroaki in a panic.

"Of course I heard that. But I don't want to lose to him if I ever fight him again, you know?"

"That's..." Satsuki was well aware of what it was like to be completely helpless in an emergency. That was why she struggled to find her words.

"There's also a risk that only the heroes have," Rio added with a sigh.

"What?" Hiroaki asked.

"If the degree of assimilation is too high, control of your body will be stolen by the upper high rank spirit within you."

The heroes all gasped in shock.

"Saint Erica is an example of this. She raised her degree of assimilation so

high, the earth spirit inside her took over her body. Satsuki, you should know what happened to her as a result."

Satsuki's expression turned grim.

"What happened to her?" Hiroaki asked.

"She created a natural disaster. The ground—no, the entire earth flipped over and rushed at us like a tsunami reaching all the way to the sky..." Satsuki recalled the scene she witnessed back then with a bitter look.

"Seriously...?" Hiroaki muttered in a daze.

"Because of the limit, the spirit should only be able to take over for a short period of time. But there's no telling what the upper high rank spirit will do in that time. If they use more power than a human body can withstand, the hero will weaken and die. Do you still want to increase your assimilation knowing that?"

Hiroaki fell silent.

"As long as you keep the degree low, you're no different from a regular human. If you want to gain strength, train properly and improve yourself the old fashioned way. You may learn how to control your assimilation safely too," Rio advised.

"Hold up. That makes it sound like there's an *unsafe* way?" Hiroaki asked with a questioning look.

"There is. It's an extremely dangerous and drastic method. It's the method Saint Erica used. The ice hero may have used it too. But I do not wish for you to use it—no, I do not want you to fall into such a state. Which is why I will explain what it is."

In a way, this was the main topic he wanted to discuss.

"Heroes can force their assimilation degree to increase by suffering a fatal wound."

For the umpteenth time, a pained silence fell over the meeting.

"Heroes cannot die easily even if they're mortally wounded. This is because of the regenerative abilities they gain through assimilation healing their wounds. However, recovering from a fatal wound requires powerful assimilation. So by suffering a wound that requires powerful assimilation to heal, you'll be able to force the degree of assimilation to increase."

Satsuki turned pale with a gasp, realizing something.

"Yesterday, Satsuki suffered a fatal wound in the battle with the golem. The reason she didn't die was because of her self-regeneration from her assimilation," Rio pointed out. He gave Satsuki a worried look.

“I knew something was weird... I was sure I felt it go through my chest. I was also in strangely good form during this morning’s training...” Satsuki smiled, distressed.

“Are you feeling okay, Satsuki?” Masato asked, worrying about any changes to her body.

“Yeah, I just said I was in good form.” She kept up the best smile she could manage to ease his worries.

“Breaking through the limit just once shouldn’t increase the degree of assimilation. As long as you don’t repeatedly suffer fatal wounds over a short period of time like Saint Erica...”

“Yeah...”

“You should be able to maintain a low degree while living normally, but if you feel like anything changes, let me know.”

“Thank you,” Satsuki said with a fleeting smile.

“I get what you’re saying about not using fatal wounds to strengthen the assimilation. But being able to control the degree of assimilation is still essential. Am I wrong?” Hiroaki asked with a dead serious expression.

“Hey now, Hiroaki. That can be discussed later,” Masato said with a conflicted look, but Hiroaki kept making his point about the core of the matter.

“I’m saying we need enough power to avoid getting fatally wounded if something happens. Like yesterday, if we’d had more power... If we had been able to use the hero power better, Satsuki might have avoided her wound.”

“That’s true,” Masato agreed reluctantly.

“Yesterday’s attack was my fault—I shouldn’t have left the castle. I didn’t know monsters like that would appear, so I was one step behind. Without Lina, the situation would have been doomed,” Rio said with deep regret.

“That’s not right,” Satsuki pointed out with a pout. “Although it vexes me a little to say this, I don’t think Hiroaki is wrong. It’s reassuring to have you protect us, but it’s not healthy for us to be completely dependent on you either. That’s why I agree with Hiroaki in wanting to become stronger. Not only to protect myself, but everyone else too.”

Hiroaki snorted to hide his embarrassment. “Hmph.”

“Besides, you shouldn’t be assimilating recklessly either, Haruto. It’s wrong to make you stand alone in the line of fire, don’t you think?” Satsuki stood up from her chair to lash out at Rio with force.

“Huh? Uh...”

“And in your case, it’s not only assimilation, no?”

Bound by the restrictions of the transcendent ones, he couldn't even fight without a mask. His situation meant he wasn't only at risk of being forgotten by others, but of losing his own memories too. Satsuki pouted in disapproval at him worrying about others.

"I only gathered you all today to explain the risks of assimilation..."

Rio grimaced, eyes darting about with guilt.

"Hee hee. Their positions are reversed now," Charlotte said with an amused laugh, seeing Satsuki scolding Rio. Christina and Lilianna were also giggling to themselves.

"Well, at least the original goal was accomplished. And Haruto *should* worry about himself a little more."

Francois watched over Rio and Satsuki with a cheerful smile on his face.

◇ ◇ ◇

Some moments ago, elsewhere in the Galarc Castle, Stewart Huguenot had returned to his patrol duty. While he was on his rounds near the guest house, he ran into Duke Gregory.

"Oh?" Duke Gregory had just finished his meeting with Duke Huguenot and was on his way out of the guest house with his guards. Stewart approached him. "Good day, Duke Gregory."

"Well met." Duke Gregory gave him a friendly smile.

"Are you leaving already?"

It hadn't been that long since Duke Gregory entered his father's office.

"Yes, I've finished my business here."

"I see. Have a nice day." Stewart bowed respectfully and waited for the duke to pass.

"Hmm. Come to think of it..." Duke Gregory started on his way, then stopped as though he had remembered something.

"You just so happen to be the same age as Queen Christina, yes?" he asked.

"I'm one year younger. Although we did take some classes together."

"Oh, really now? I'm sure she must have been beautiful back then too."

"Ha ha, many of the students in my year admired her. But no one ever got close to her."

"I get it. When someone's *too* beautiful, they become impossible to approach."

In comparison to Duke Gregory being the head of his house, Stewart was

merely a son of a duke house—and a disinherited one at that. Despite that, Gregory was speaking to him courteously and amiably.

"Her superior abilities also played a large part. She was always at the top of her year while she was at the academy, which made all the boys feel inferior."

It didn't feel bad to be treated so politely by the duke of a foreign kingdom. Stewart had a relaxed smile on his face as he made small talk.

"Ha ha ha. It's true that men are left in an awkward position when up against someone so superior. But whoever marries Queen Christina will be quite the lucky man. It would be a man's greatest honor and pride to bag such a prize," Duke Gregory said while stroking his stout chin.

"No doubt there."

"In which case, the knights of the Restoration must be quite anxious about now..." Duke Gregory said suggestively.

"What do you mean?"

"You are aware of our kingdom's Amakawa, yes?"

Stewart's eyes widened for a brief moment. "Of course... He's a famous figure."

A shadow fell over his face. It was clearly the reaction of someone taken aback by more than Haruto's name suddenly being brought up.

Oh? What's this?

Duke Gregory's eyes narrowed as he observed Stewart carefully. Incidentally, Duke Gregory was one of the people who felt a strong sense of discomfort from missing his memories of Rio. His own connection to Rio was weak, but he felt extreme wariness and hostility towards him. Then, thinking he would be able to draw something interesting out of Stewart...

"It seems Queen Christina has been frequenting Amakawa's mansion for some time now. I wonder if he's incurred the displeasure of the knights meant to protect her. Who in their right mind would make a queen travel to their own residence?" he lamented dramatically. It was an attempt to shift the curtain over Stewart's heart and reveal the shadow he had shown a glimpse of earlier.

"Yes... I can't say I agree with it either. But I'm sure Queen Christina knows what she's doing..."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Well, if you can keep it between just you and me..."

Stewart hesitated for a brief moment but ultimately decided to speak. He was probably in high spirits from being able to engage in noble small talk again. Although it was with a foreign noble, it had been a long time since he had such

an opportunity.

"Of course."

"I think she may be trying to borrow Sir Amawaka's power for the Restoration. She fears he'll reject her, so she's going out of her way to show reservation before him..."

"I see, I see. His military strength is indeed on another level. But there should be no need to show any reservation. Our kingdom is allied with the Restoration, so if your leader requests assistance, he should be happy to help. That is his duty as a member of noble society."

Duke Gregory's smooth speech succeeded in stirring Stewart's negative feelings about Rio.

"Well, he was originally a commoner, so I'm not surprised," Stewart scoffed, showing his deep-rooted discrimination towards Rio's birth status.

"Heh. He's a former lowborn, you say?" Duke Gregory agreed with a cold laugh.

I have my doubts about that, though. His ability is the real deal. There's no doubt about that, and he shouldn't be underestimated for it. I don't like to admit it, but he's necessary to the Galarc Kingdom. I can understand why His Majesty gives him special treatment. Although it doesn't change the fact that his background is suspicious...

Duke Gregory actually valued Rio rather highly on the inside, conflicted as it made him feel. But he wasn't about to say that aloud. He was trying to goad Stewart into revealing more information right now.

Although his expectations were low, it was possible Stewart knew something about Rio that he didn't. There was no knowing what kind of useful information could be lying hidden. And so...

"Goodness me, I'm glad we can agree with each other so well. If I recall correctly, your name is..."

Duke Gregory expressed affinity in order to close the distance with Stewart.

"It's Stewart." Seeing Duke Gregory try to recall his name, he voluntarily introduced himself. He must have been happy to be acknowledged.

"That's right, Stewart. This meeting must be some kind of fate. Would you like to take a walk with me and talk some more?" As a sign of wishing to build rapport, Duke Gregory spoke in a more casual tone.

"Of course. I would be delighted to." Stewart accepted the invitation with a smile. The two then walked shoulder to shoulder, with the duke's guards following at a distance.

“Speaking of Amakawa, don’t you think he’s rather suspicious? He claimed his parents were immigrants, but there’s absolutely no history of him before he suddenly came to fame. Then he went and miraculously vanished from our memories for a period of time—it’s honestly getting rather eerie.”

Duke Gregory brought up the subject of Rio once again. He wasn’t lying—this was what he truly thought of Rio. He could acknowledge Rio’s abilities, but as a man who didn’t trust easily, he still felt a sense of suspicion.

“Yes, he’s a mysterious one. I remember the first time I saw him in the outskirts of Amande...”

“He saved Cretia’s daughter, Liselotte, from that monster attack, yes? I heard he displayed a strength unthinkable for his age as he scattered the swarm.”

“Yes, I was there too. And the rumors of his strength are accurate. Though I believe a large part of it was due to his enchanted sword...” Stewart said with a somewhat bitter look, unable to acknowledge Rio’s strength honestly.

“Hmm. But don’t you think it’s rather strange? A man as strong as him was completely unheard of until then. Enchanted swords aren’t easy for commoners to get their hands on either.”

“I agree, it’s very unnatural. I’ve suspected him of hiding his past and masquerading as someone of different status before, but...”

“Oh, how sharp of you. As expected of Duke Huguenot’s son, I should say. Wonderful.”

Stewart looked pleased at Duke Gregory’s exaggerated praise of him. “N-No, not at all. It’s been a rumor for a while...”

“I was actually thinking the exact same thing. He must be lying about who he is.”

“But is there a reason for a man that powerful to hide his identity?”

“No no, he may have some kind of dark past he wants to hide, you see?”

“Right... When you put it that way, it makes sense. In which case, he shouldn’t be left in the center of noble society. It’s too dangerous.”

“The abnormal phenomena involving everyone’s memories of him happened just recently. It was explained as a curse from a magic artifact that blocked everyone’s perception of him, but I think it sounds fishy. He might be using that artifact to hide any unfavorable moments from his past. Is it silly of me to suspect him of this?”

“Good point. I think your theory is well thought, Duke Gregory. You’ve certainly convinced me,” Stewart said, praising Duke Gregory and expressing his strong agreement.

“Oh, you think so too?”

“Yes. If he’s able to manipulate the memories and perception of others, it should be easy for him to lie about his identity. Wouldn’t it be better to investigate that artifact in detail?”

“Apparently the artifact was taken by an opposing magic user.”

“Surely not... He might have hidden it away,” Stewart said with a doubtful look.

“I did pass my apprehensions on to His Majesty, but he told me not to speak nonsense and dismissed me.”

“What? Is there a chance the king is being manipulated too?”

“Oh dear, don’t say that too loud now. If it’s true, His Majesty would be a victim, but without any proof, you would sound like you’re doubting the king.”

“R-Right, it was a slip of the tongue. Forgive me.” Stewart flinched and apologized in a hurry.

“It’s fine, I understand what you mean. But it would be best to keep it here...just between you and me,” Duke Gregory said with a smile.

“Yes... That aside, the fact he’s risen this far while lying about his background shows he couldn’t resist the desire for status. That says a lot about his character.”

Stewart mocked Rio, either completely convinced that this was fact without any proof, or perhaps to cover up the guilt of his inappropriate words earlier.

“Indeed. However, at present, we can only theorize.” Duke Gregory sighed uneasily.

“If only we had some kind of evidence of his dark past that we could use to expose him...”

“Evidence, huh... There’s one thing that may be helpful...”

“You know something?” Stewart asked.

“It happened during the commotion yesterday. According to some knights who were at the scene, a little girl called him Rio. If Haruto Amakawa is his alias, then Rio may be his real name... But it really isn’t enough to change anything,” Duke Gregory uttered without any particular hope.

However, Stewart froze. “Rio...?”

Duke Gregory didn’t miss the change in his expression. “Oh? Is something the matter?”

“Ah, no...”

“The look on your face is saying there is.”

“N-No, I can’t be sure of it, so I can’t say... I have no proof either...”

Stewart's voice cracked, and he trailed off as he spoke. Various thoughts were flying about his head at that moment.

Rio... Is it him? No, that can't be. But what if it is...?

Wouldn't it be very bad if it was him? The sudden knowledge left his thoughts scattered, but he knew on instinct that it would be.

Don't tell me—is that why father brought up the past just now?!

That was his next realization.

I see, my father was in the rooftop garden during the commotion yesterday. He must have heard someone call him by that name...

Stewart's expression froze over. Dots were connecting themselves before he could even process the facts.

But is it really the same person? His hair color is different... Wait, his current hair color is slightly different to before. Could he...?

He broke out in a cold sweat as his heart beat erratically. He desperately wished for it all to be a lie.

"Stewart." Duke Gregory called his name impatiently. Stewart snapped back to his senses.

"Y-Yes?"

"I'm very curious about what you're thinking. Will you not share your thoughts with me?"

"U-Um, about that... Ah..."

He didn't want to share them. His thoughts weren't even gathered enough for him to make a judgment on sharing them. Stewart tripped over his words awkwardly.

"If you won't tell me, I'll have to ask the other members of the Restoration for clarification..."

Duke Gregory was unsatisfied with that answer after seeing such a reaction right before his eyes. He decided to say something Stewart wouldn't like—to ask around and see if anyone else knew anything.

"W-Wait a moment! I need a little time... Just a little time to think! Give me one day, at least until tomorrow. Can you please wait?"

"Very well. Then I will wait until tomorrow morning."

"Th-Thank you very much."

"I shall come visit you tomorrow."

"Yes..."

Duke Gregory gave a clear warning, making Stewart nod somberly.

"I look forward to what you have to say."

Once they’d decided on where to meet, Duke Gregory took his leave.

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Chapter 4: Sleepover

In King Francois's meeting room, after the meeting with the heroes concluded...

"Princess Christina and Princess Lilianna are coming over to the mansion after this, but you should come too, Hiroaki. Bring Rei and Kouta too. That's okay right, Haruto?" Masato asked.

"Of course," Rio agreed with a smile.

"Huh? Why should I?"

Hiroaki's response wasn't enthusiastic, but he seemed to be happy to receive the invitation. His embarrassment prevented him from reacting honestly, but he didn't seem as displeased as he would have others believe.

"There's gonna be some good stuff on the menu tonight. If you come back with us now, they might even make some dishes from Earth for you."

"What? F-Fine, I guess. Those two would probably want that, so I'll let them know."

"Heh heh! It's decided!" Lured by Masato's promise of food, Hiroaki surrendered easily.

"Are you sure, Sir Amakawa?" Chrisina asked hesitantly.

"Yes. The more the merrier, so feel free to invite Roanna along as well. I'm sure Celia would be happy to see her."

"In that case, I'll take you up on that, Haruto," Hiroaki said awkwardly.

"If you have any requests, feel free to suggest them."

"R-Really? I want to eat sukiyaki! I like it even more with udon noodles afterward, but..." Hiroaki made his request hesitantly, unsure if it was possible.

"Sukiyaki with udon, right? We can do that."

"You can?! I didn't think udon existed..." Hiroaki was wide-eyed and ecstatic at Rio's smooth reply.

"We have frozen udon from when I prepared a batch."

"You have everything... I'm glad I asked."

"We also have miso soup, pickled vegetables, and fresh eggs."

"You have good taste." Hiroaki grinned in satisfaction.

"Liselotte's staying over tonight too. Why not make it a huge sleepover for

everyone?" Satsuki said, inviting Christina and Lilianna. Thus, it was decided that a sleepover would be held.

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That evening, a large number of guests visited Rio's mansion. First came Liselotte and Aria. Then, Lilianna arrived, followed by Christina, Flora, Roanna, Hiroaki, Rei, and Kouta. Rio welcomed them all at the entrance hall of the mansion.

"My apologies for barging in with such numbers, Sir Amakawa," Christina greeted him on behalf of her group.

"I should be the one apologizing. I'm sorry my casual invitation caused so much trouble for you."

"No, it's no trouble at all. Flora's overjoyed to be here too."

"Yes!" Flora agreed brightly.

"That's good, then," Rio said with a relieved smile.

Celia stepped forward beside Rio. "Welcome, Queen Christina, Princess Flora."

"Good evening, professor," Christina said.

"Thanks for having us today," Flora added.

"And Roanna as well. Welcome."

"Hello. It's so nice to see you again," Roanna said with a curtsy. She then turned to Rio and watched his expression while curtsying again. "Thank you for the invitation, Sir Amakawa."

"Yo. I'm here," Hiroaki said with a wave, greeting Rio casually.

"Welcome, everyone. Rei and Kouta too," Rio said with a smile as he looked over at the two.

"We're honored you still remember us."

"Thanks for having us over."

The older and younger schoolmate duo, Rei and Kouta, replied to Rio happily.

"Please, come inside," Rio said, inviting them farther into the mansion.

Gouki's wife, Kayoko, was working as their guide. "Allow me to show you to your rooms," she said.

"We can help carry your belongings."

Sayo, Aoi, and Gouki's attendants from the Yagumo region took charge of the belongings from Christina's group.

Thus, the group headed towards their respective rooms.

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After that, in the mansion's large bath, the first to bathe on this day were the girls—specifically, the royals and nobles visiting the mansion as guests. As hosts, Charlotte and Celia were bathing as well.

"Ah..." Christina soaked in the wide tub and let out a sigh of happiness.

Flora sat down beside her sister with an enchanted expression. "It feels so nice..."

"I had no idea that soaking in a large tub was so blissful... I see why Sir Hiroaki always insists on bathtubs deep enough to submerge himself in now," Roanna said. She was also soaking with them, spellbound.

"Is this your first time at Sir Haruto's mansion, Roanna?" Flora asked.

"Yes. It makes me wish I could bathe like this every day."

"I know the feeling. Once you experience it once, it's so hard to go back..."

Flora and Roanna conversed with each other with fully relaxed muscles.

"Hee hee. Feel free to visit every day to bathe," Charlotte said to them from the side.

"N-No, I couldn't do that..." Roanna refused immediately.

"Sir Haruto is the head of the house, and he wouldn't refuse either. Isn't that right, Lady Celia?" Charlotte said, calling for Celia to speak from where she was soaking beside her.

"That's right," Celia agreed with a giggle.

"And how are you finding the water, Princess Lilianna?" Charlotte continued, this time bringing the conversation to Lilianna, who was bathing with them.

"It's wonderful; it's like my entire being has been soothed. I'd love to see this culture spread to Centostella, for sure." Lilianna was also enjoying the mansion's bathtub; she let out a sigh of relaxation.

"In that case, feel free to come visit and bathe as much as you want while you're staying in our kingdom. I'm sure Sir Masato would be happy too," Charlotte said cheerfully, without referencing *why* Masato would be happy.

"Thank you for the consideration," Lilianna said shyly, looking slightly troubled. "He... Sir Amakawa is an amazing person, isn't he?" she continued after a small pause, mumbling quietly. The attention of those soaking in the water gathered on her.

"He is." Charlotte answered first in agreement. Flora also nodded without

hesitation.

“Yes, Sir Haruto is an amazing person.”

Christina grimaced a little at her sister’s deification of Rio. Roanna watched her expression change from beside her.

“After everything involving Sir Takahisa, I conveyed my gratitude to Sir Amakawa for all the trouble he had to deal with. But he tilted his head as though he had no idea what I meant. In fact, he lowered his head to apologize about Sir Masato and Lady Aki, and offered vital information...” Lilianna confided with a look between confusion and guilt.

“Do you not understand his intentions?” Charlotte asked with a giggle.

“To be honest, I can’t grasp his true motives. I was expecting to be in a position where I would be excluded from all information...”

Lilianna confided her honest mental state to them. Takahisa had tried to kidnap Miharu during the banquet and just recently created a commotion by running away. Lilianna was equally at fault for being unable to stop him from running wild, so that was more than enough reason for Rio to distrust the Centostella Kingdom.

Yet, Rio had chosen to share the complex situation he was in and the secrets of the heroes as though he trusted Lilianna.

“Haruto’s true motives are simple—he trusts Masato, who trusts you, so he trusts you as well,” Charlotte answered proudly. Flora nodded along, while Christina and Celia had vague smiles on their faces.

Meanwhile, Lilianna, who still didn’t know Rio very well, swallowed her breath in surprise.

“How can he trust us?” Roanna muttered.

“Roanna?” That appeared to be a big surprise to Christina, who stared at Roanna wide-eyed.

“I’m sorry. I understand the logic, but I just don’t think it’s as easy to do as it sounds. This might apply to Princess Lilianna’s question as well, but I don’t have a grasp on what kind of person Sir Amakawa is either.” Roanna lowered her head as she explained the reason for her sudden question.

“I see...” With that, Christina didn’t question her any further.

“I’ve been wondering that too. Can you tell us what kind of person Sir Amakawa is?” Lilianna asked, jumping on what Roanna had said. In fact, she had probably brought up the topic of Rio in the first place because she wanted to know more about him.

“Sure. There’s rarely an occasion for the princesses of three kingdoms to get

together naked like this. As the princess of the hosting kingdom, it would be rude of me not to present a story for you to take home."

Charlotte nodded generously, showing her great sense of hospitality.

"It might turn into a long bath, though. You'll get dizzy if you soak for too long, so if it gets too hard for you, please change to a footbath and listen," she said, taking the lead by standing up from the bath and sitting on the edge of the tub.

"But first, I'd like to hear from Princess Lilianna and Lady Roanna, who don't know Sir Haruto that well, what their honest impression of him is. That way, I can clear up any misunderstandings," Christina said with a bright look of curiosity sparkling in her eyes.

"He's a mysterious gentleman. He has so much strength, yet he seems too kind and quiet to be involved in conflict. I do think he's a very kind gentleman. But at the same time, I feel like there's something about him that cannot be perceived. Like there's no knowing what he's thinking..." Lilianna said, describing her impression of Rio.

"He isn't a talkative one," Charlotte agreed, sounding like she was having fun.

"But I can't see what he's thinking or feeling deep down. I can't see his true thoughts. Normally, people's thoughts show in their actions so you can tell what they want to do at the moment, so it's like he doesn't have much of a sense of self..."

Charlotte applauded with a satisfied look. "That's quite the keen eye you have, as I should have expected. Now, can we hear from you next, Roanna?" She turned the spotlight on Roanna, who looked at Christina hesitantly, as though to confirm it was okay to speak.

"Speak. I'd like to hear it too," Christina said with a nod.

She then stood up and sat on the edge of the bathtub. It was her way of expressing her intention to settle down for a long discussion. Then, Flora and Celia also stood up and sat on the edge, and Roanna followed suit.

"Princess Lilianna has accurately verbalized the vague impression I had of him," she said. "I completely agree with what she said about being unable to see his true thoughts. If I had to add something, then I've wondered before if having so much influence yet such unclear intentions makes it easy for him to be misunderstood or suspected by others."

"Exactly. If I could say something without fear of being misunderstood, I may be wary of him too. Sir Amakawa currently has the same influence as a

high-class noble in a key position of the Galarc Kingdom, if not more. If he wished, he could make it difficult for our kingdom to continue its relationship with Sir Masato and Lady Aki...”

As the one who brought up the topic in the first place, Lilianna seemed to think she had to reveal her true thoughts. What she was saying was stepping pretty far over the line.

“I see. Being offered free information and receiving hospitality from someone like that would leave anyone confused about their intentions,” Charlotte said in understanding, the corners of her mouth curling up.

“If anything, I’d feel more at ease if he requested some kind of information in return. Otherwise I don’t know what he wants me to do...” Lilianna said.

“He’s just not the type to seek anything in return when he does things for others,” Celia agreed with a wry smile.

“There’s nothing more expensive than free. Lady Suzune once said these words, and I think they fit this situation perfectly,” Lilianna said.

Charlotte smiled mischievously, enjoying the sight of Lilianna’s mental agony.

This is by no means irrelevant to me either.

Recognizing the similarities between them, Christina pulled herself up with a sigh.

“Why doesn’t he seek compensation? It doesn’t seem like he’s acting out of noblesse oblige either,” Roanna said, peering at Christina’s side profile.

“It’s simple. There’s just nothing he wants from you in repayment. If there was, I’m sure he would ask, but there isn’t, so he doesn’t,” Charlotte answered nonchalantly.

“But isn’t it a waste not to create any favors in noble society? If he does it to the wrong person, they may look down on him for it...” Roanna pressed further.

“If that happens, then that person was rude and deserves no further association. But that’s also what makes Sir Haruto so interesting. He doesn’t like conflict, he’s so kind, and people regularly misunderstand and look down on him, without realizing they’re making an enemy of someone they would never want as their enemy,” Charlotte said with an elated grin.

Roanna shuddered and sank back into the bathtub. “I-I see...”

“He is a gentleman with enough military power and influence to get anyone to do anything he wants—he just doesn’t feel like doing that. And it is my hobby —I mean, duty—to teach gratitude to the fools who fail to realize this on Sir Haruto’s behalf, since he’s too kind to do it himself.”

Charlotte seemed in high spirits as she spoke. The flush on her cheeks from being in the bath made her smile even more charming than usual.

"Since we're already here, I'd love to hear about Sir Haruto from Lady Celia, who's known him the longest," she said, inviting Celia to talk.

"I think Princess Lilianna's and Roanna's words were correct. There's no doubt it's hard to read his thoughts." Celia spoke of Rio's temperament with an almost strained smile.

"But that's part of Sir Haruto's charm," Charlotte said fondly.

Celia nodded without hesitation. "Yes. But he does have true thoughts of what he wants. If he thinks something is necessary, he will convey it. But when he does, it isn't because he wants someone to do something..."

She paused in search of the right words.

"He respects other people's wills over his own. If they proceed in a dangerous direction, he'll warn them. If there's something they've missed, Haruto will tell them even if it leaves him in an unfavorable position. He'll give us the information we need to avoid making the wrong decisions. That's what his true thoughts are for. Otherwise, he rarely ever shares what he's really thinking... It's a little troubling at times," Celia said with a small pout.

"Oh? And you're unsatisfied with that, Lady Celia?" Charlotte asked teasingly.

"Not unsatisfied, but... He puts himself last. He doesn't care for himself, but he'll do his best for others. I just wish he would treasure himself more," Celia answered, looking a little sad by the end of her sentence.

"All of Sir Haruto's actions are like that, though I'm sure he would deny it." Charlotte imagined the sight of Rio shaking his head and laughed in amusement.

"Maybe that's why I want to support him by his side. The problem is that he's so capable, he doesn't need any support..." Celia said.

"The conversation turned to Lady Celia bragging about her relationship partway, but how was that? Do you understand Sir Haruto now?" Charlotte summarized everything mischievously and turned to Lilianna in question.

"I-I wasn't bragging!" Celia objected with a shocked look.

"Hee hee."

How cute, Christina and Flora thought as they laughed.

"Princess Lilianna, I know you're worried you've caused him trouble, but I'm sure he doesn't think the same. He's just doing what he thinks is necessary for Masato's sake," Celia said to Lilianna in an attempt to cover up her embarrassment.

“Thank you very much. I think I have a deeper understanding of him now.”

Lilianna smiled softly and thanked her.

It’s no wonder Sir Takahisa couldn’t compete with him.

Takahisa was a man who only cared about himself. That’s why he tried to make others do what he wanted—and lashed out when they didn’t. In comparison, Rio cared about others to the point of sacrificing himself. It was clear who was more widely adored by others.

A shadow of sadness fell over Lilianna’s eyes as she thought that.

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After Christina and the others got out of the bath, Latifa and Liselotte headed into it.

“Aki’s avoiding Haruto?” Liselotte repeated, voice echoing through the bathroom.

“Yeah. I invited her to eat with me and Onii-chan for both breakfast and lunch, but she evaded me both times. I don’t think she completely hates him, but...”

Latifa rested her chin on her arms at the edge of the tub and let out a weary sigh.

“Sorry for troubling you. I thought you’d know the two of them well enough to come up with an idea I haven’t thought of,” she said hesitantly.

“Don’t be silly, Suzune—no, Latifa. I’m happy you came to me for help. Feel free to consult me about anything.”

Liselotte called her Latifa on purpose and smiled gently.

“Thank you, Liselotte.”

Latifa grinned happily and threw herself at Liselotte, who was soaking in the bathtub beside her.

“That tickles, Latifa,” Liselotte said, dimples showing on her face.

“Tee hee.”

“Can you tell me more about Haruto... No, about Amakawa Haruto and Aki’s relationship? I know they’re siblings, but I don’t know the details.” Liselotte sat up on the edge of the tub and patted the space beside her.

“Sure!”

Latifa beamed happily and sat beside Liselotte. She then told her about the relationship between Amakawa Haruto and Sendo Aki. About how when Haruto was seven and Aki was four, their parents divorced and they were separated.

About how Aki was young, and seeing her mother suffer made her detest her father and brother.

“That’s why Aki feels conflicted about the current Onii-chan, who’s his reincarnation. Onii-chan also knows that she hates Amakawa Haruto, so he refrains from interacting with her too... But I didn’t hear their thoughts directly,” Latifa said in summary.

“And what do you want to do about it?” Liselotte asked.

“I don’t want things to stay the way they are. I’m not Amakawa Haruto’s little sister, but I kind of see Aki as a sister...”

“So you want the two of them to be closer? Do you want to set up an opportunity for the two of them to talk?”

“Yes! I want them to talk things out properly, just once! But all I can do is invite the two of them to eat together...”

“I see. In that case, it would be better for there to be less people there. They’ll be discussing a pretty delicate topic...”

“Yeah. But I don’t think I should be the one inviting them to talk about it, and Aki’s caught on to me and started avoiding Onii-chan for every meal. That’s why I’m wondering if there’s any other way of setting up an opportunity...”

With so many people living under one roof, it was quite difficult to discuss things in secret. Even more so when one party was actively avoiding the other.

“You’ll have to find a natural excuse to lure Aki out.”

“Yeah. Do you have any good ideas?” Latifa asked, quietly staring at Liselotte’s side profile. Liselotte noticed her gaze and turned to look at her.

“Shall I invite them, then?” she said, responding to the little girl who looked up to her.

“Huh?!”

“I don’t know if it’ll go well, but I have a good excuse in mind I could use. Though I may need to make some preparations in advance.”

“Really?! Thank you, Liselotte!”

Overcome with emotion, Latifa clung to Liselotte.

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“I-It’s still early to be happy. I don’t know if it’ll work out. You haven’t even heard my idea yet.”

Liselotte squirmed a little, embarrassed by such a straightforward display of affection.

“No, if it’s you helping out, I’m sure it’ll go well!”

“I hope so... But I think you could have gone to the others for help too. Miharu should know about Haruto and Aki well, and everyone else would happily help out too,” Liselotte said bashfully.

“Maybe... But you were the first person I thought to ask.”

“Why’s that?” Liselotte asked curiously.

“Why... Hmm. Because you’re special...”

Latifa herself didn’t seem to know the reason. She scratched her head.

“How so?”

“You’re like a real sister to me. Oh, but that goes for everyone else. Hmm. Maybe because I have a connection to Rikka? I know all we did was ride the same bus, so we weren’t actually close, but that makes you special to me,” Latifa said with a carefree grin. Those words seemed to resonate in Liselotte’s chest.

“Gosh, you’re just so cute.” This time, Liselotte gave Latifa a squeeze.

“Huh?” Latifa was round-eyed, having not expected the return hug.

“I think of you as my little sister as well, so feel free to rely on me whenever,” Liselotte said gently, arms still wrapped around her.

“Yup! Big sis!” Latifa replied, beaming from ear to ear.

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As dinnertime arrived, the group of young men, including Hiroaki, Rei, Kouta, Masato, and Rio finished their bath after the girls and entered the dining room.

“All right, it’s time for sukiyaki!”

“It actually smells like sukiyaki in here.”

“I can’t believe I’d get to smell this in another world...”

“I’m starving!”

The room instantly became more lively.

“You’re right on time. Your table is over there—on the opposite side of Queen Christina and the others,” Satsuki said, in the middle of setting the table.

“Got it. Now, how shall we sit...”

Hiroaki rubbed his chin as he considered the order of seating based on those

already sitting down. The table was a long rectangular shape, and one side had Roanna, Flora, Christina, Lilianna, and Charlotte seated in that order.

Furthermore, Satsuki was to sit on the other side of Charlotte. And since Hiroaki and the boys were to sit across from them...

“Look, Kouta, it’s like a mixer.”

“Let’s be quiet, Rei.”

Rei was fidgeting excitedly, and Kouta looked ashamed to know him.

“In that case, how about the two heroes sit in the middle?” Rio suggested as the host, gesturing for Hiroaki and Masato to sit first.

“Well, that makes sense. Let’s sit, Masato.”

“Okay.”

Hiroaki sat across from Christina, and Masato sat down opposite Lilianna.

“Then the two guests can sit over here. Sir Haruto, please take a seat across from Princess Flora,” Charlotte said, beckoning Rei and Kouta over to herself and Satsuki.

“Okay!”

“I-If you don’t mind.”

Rei raised his hand and nodded eagerly, while Kouta hurried to his seat while blushing.

“Hee hee. What a delightful group of people,” Charlotte said with a giggle.

Satsuki was also smiling in amusement. “There’s no need to be so nervous,” she said to them.

“Then I’ll be taking this seat.”

Once Rio confirmed his guests were all seated, he took his seat in front of Flora. On the right of her was Roanna, while Christina was to the left.

“Thank you for inviting us today, Sir Haruto.”

“And me as well, Sir Amakawa.”

Flora was in high spirits at being able to eat together with Rio, whereas Roanna was staring at Rio’s face closely as she bowed.

“It’s my pleasure,” Rio said, returning the bow with a soft smile.

“I guess I’ll be beside Haruto, then.”

Celia came over and took the seat to Rio’s right, across from Roanna. The male to female ratio was no longer equal, but they maintained the shape of six people sitting across from six people.

“Yay, I get to eat dinner with the professor! It’s like a school reunion, isn’t it, Roanna?” Flora said excitedly, clapping her hands together cutely in joy.

“Yes, it does seem like that.” Roanna looked between Rio’s and Celia’s faces

and nodded cheerfully.

"Sorry for the wait."

Just then, Sayo and Aoi arrived, carrying their meal on trays.

Hiroaki made a sound of joy. "Ooh!"

On the trays were an empty iron pot on a pot stand and a separate plate loaded with the ingredients for sukiyaki. It included beef, the main ingredient of sukiyaki, as well as the orthodox composition of tofu, mushrooms, parsley, shirataki noodles, scallions, and onions.

"Oh? A sukiyaki using the soy sauce-based stock of the Kanto region, I see. The scallions and onions have been heated already too. Looks like you know what you're doing." Hiroaki looked down at the empty iron pot and ingredients with a satisfied smirk.

"It smells appetizing," Christina said, sniffing the air.

"That's the smell of scallions after being fried in beef tallow. If you fry them first, the scent of the scallions and beef tallow transfers better into the soup," Hiroaki explained smugly.

"I see."

"By the way, onions also take a while to cook, so it's an absolute rule to heat it separately first. This way, the onion flavor seeps into the stock when it's boiled," Hiroaki continued, showing off his knowledge with a triumphant expression. It seemed he had rather strong opinions about the making of sukiyaki, which was no surprise, considering he had been the one to request it.

"You sure have a lot to say about it when you're not even the one who prepared it," Satsuki sighed in exasperation.

"Ha ha. Well, it's Hiroaki," Rei agreed with a laugh. Before long, a tray was placed in front of everyone.

"That's enough of that. Let's eat already! Can I put the stock in?" Masato's hunger must have reached its limit, as he immediately picked up the jar with the stock in it. However...

"Masato, you idiot! Wait! Listen up, there's a correct way to eat sukiyaki. First, you fry a small amount of the meat, spreading the fat around the pot...!" Hiroaki, appointing himself boss of the pot, stopped Masato from proceeding.

"What? I just boil it all together."

"I know Hiroaki was the one to request sukiyaki, but I thought it'd be a good opportunity to try making it ourselves. It's a simple matter of heating the pot and placing the ingredients in it in order, but if anyone has any concerns, we can have it prepared for you. What do you think?" Satsuki said to the members who

had never had sukiyaki before, ignoring Masato and Hiroaki.

“Since you’ve gone to all the trouble, let’s try it ourselves,” Christina said, looking at Flora and Roanna. Flora nodded enthusiastically, and Roanna didn’t make any particular objections.

“What an interesting idea. I’d love to try making it myself,” Lilianna agreed, choosing to make her own sukiyaki as well. Thus, it was finally time to place the ingredients into the pot.

“Now, let me teach you the most delicious way of eating sukiyaki. Listen up. First goes the meat. You fry just the meat by itself. With this, the fat of the meat seeps out, allowing you to enjoy the taste of the meat alone.”

Hiroaki picked up slices of beef with his long chopsticks and placed them into the iron pot. The pot stand was a magic artifact that could heat the pot, so the moment the meat was placed inside, it sizzled and released an appetizing smell. Smoke started to rise as well.

“Wow...” Flora muttered, eyes sparkling.

“It smells good,” Roanna said, her expression brightening too.

“There are some fools that boil the meat with the ingredients in the stock right away, but that’s heresy to me. First, you fry the meat, then add the stock while there’s still some red to the color. But take care not to add too much or the flavor of the meat will weaken. Normally, you add a bit of the stock as you fry more of the meat. You add the other ingredients after you’re done frying the first meat and savoring the taste.”

“Look, the meat’s a good color now. Isn’t it enough?” Satsuki asked, interrupting Hiroaki’s detailed explanation in an annoyed tone.

“Shut it. I know what I’m doing. Who do you think I am?”

Hiroaki looked irritated as he poured the stock over his still-red meat. The sizzle of evaporating liquid could be heard as the sweet smell of the stock spread through the area. After soaking the meat in the stock, Hiroaki finally brought his carefully prepared slice of beef to his mouth.

“Guh! It’s so good!” The taste of the saucy meat exploded in his mouth, making him groan with emotion.

“Now, you eat some rice.”

Hiroaki ate a mouthful of the white rice in his bowl. Beside him, Masato gulped as he watched Hiroaki eat his food.

“I can’t wait anymore! I’m going to fry mine too!” he shouted, hitting the limit of his patience. He fried his meat as Hiroaki began to fry his second slice.

“Shall we fry ours too?” Satsuki suggested.

“Yes,” Kouta said.

“I don’t want to wait anymore,” Rei added.

“We should start too. If there’s anything you don’t understand, please ask me,” Rio said to Flora and the others sitting across from him before frying his own meat.

“Well, you don’t have to follow the fussy guy’s instructions to the letter. Throwing everything in with the stock still tastes delicious,” Satsuki said frankly to the princesses.

“Hey, Satsuki, who are you calling a fussy guy?” Hiroaki snapped.

“I didn’t name any names.”

“Hmph. Whatever. I don’t have time to pay attention to you today. I’m busy tending to this meat.”

Hiroaki’s gaze was fixed on the meat in his pot. It was just about ready for more stock to be added, which he did so before serving it onto his rice. He then scooped both meat and rice into his mouth and swallowed.

“Gah! It’s impossible to avoid this. This endless loop of bliss. I could melt at the taste,” he said, beaming with satisfaction.

“Everyone, your meat should also be ready soon. You can add your stock now,” Rio said to Flora and the others around him.

“Right. I just pour this sauce on it, yes?” Flora nervously poured her stock on the beef in her pot. The sound of sizzling could be heard as smoke rose.

“W-Wow, that’s amazing!” she said, round-eyed and smiling. She couldn’t use chopsticks, so she elegantly cut her meat with her knife and fork before bringing it to her mouth. Flora closed her eyes happily. “Mm!”

“It’s delicious...”

“The meat just melts in my mouth.”

Christina and Lilianna also ate their meat beside her and smacked their lips at the taste.

“There’s a sweet taste to this sauce,” Roanna noted, blinking in surprise.

“That’s because there’s sugar in it.”

“How is it different from soy sauce?” Flora asked Rio.

She had eaten at the mansion a few times now, so she had experienced soy sauce-based dishes before. The stock used in the sukiyaki had resembled that color, so she had assumed it was soy sauce being used here too.

“It’s a mix of ingredients. There’s soy sauce in it, but there’s also cooking wine, a liquid called mirin, and sugar, like I just said,” Rio explained.

“So that’s why I can taste so many things.”

“It’s a wonderful flavor with depth.”

Flora and Roanna both seemed impressed.

“It’s so strange. When I hear ‘sugar,’ I normally think of desserts. I never imagined it could be used to improve the taste of savory food like this,” Celia said, watching the pleasant sight of her former students eating together.

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After dinner, all there was left to do was sleep, but it was still too early to do so, so Rio, Masato, Hiroaki, Rei, and Kouta moved to the parlor of the mansion to hold an all-boys meeting. They all sat around a table with drinks and snacks, the five of them in a circle facing each other.

“Man, it feels like we’re on a graduation trip,” Rei said as he munched on the snacks.

“Yeah, and it’s kind of refreshing for us to gather with these members,” Kouta agreed, taking a sip of the cold tea.

Hiroaki grabbed some of the snacks as well. “Haruto and Kouta are the same age, right?”

“No, I’m one year younger,” Rio answered.

“Haruto doesn’t really feel younger though,” Kouta said.

“I get what you mean—especially with the way we met. Sir Amakawa was the one protecting us from Beltrum to the Restoration.”

“It’s already been months since we first met him at Celia’s place.”

Rei and Kouta looked into the distance as they recalled those days.

“I’ve said this before, but I’m younger than you, so you don’t need to use titles with me.” Rio scratched his cheek awkwardly.

“Yeah, but I’m technically a viscount of the Restoration. It won’t look good for me to treat an honorary knight equal to count status so casually.” Rei also scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

“Who cares about that? It’s not like anyone’s watching here. He talks casually to Masato, who’s a hero now, no?” Hiroaki pointed out.

“Well, I suppose that’s true.”

“But it’s a little embarrassing to change it up now...”

Rei and Kouta exchanged looks with each other.

“But if you’re okay with it, then... Haruto?” Rei asked shyly.

“Of course,” Rio said with a happy nod. “That aside, weren’t you a baronet before? When did you become a viscount, Rei?”

“Oh, it was when I became Hiroaki’s aide a little while ago. They promoted me then.”

“I told them to treat him properly, since he’s working for a hero,” Hiroaki said with a smirk.

“Kouta’s also became Hiroaki’s aide. They tried to give him a rank, but Kouta put the offer on hold for now. Right?” Rei said, throwing an arm over Kouta’s shoulders.

“I was originally thinking of becoming an adventurer. But for some reason, I ended up helping in the production of Hiroaki’s light novel... Before I knew it, I was an aide,” Kouta explained.

“His art is really good, you know?”

“I’ve seen it before. It was amazing.”

Rei and Masato had nothing but praise for Kouta.

“I’d love to see it as well sometime.”

“Next time there’s a chance, then,” Kouta said with an embarrassed nod.

“And hear this, Haruto. This guy finally got a girlfriend!” Rei said with a grin, exposing Kouta’s recent developments.

“H-Hey, Rei!”

Kouta turned bright red. Hiroaki watched on with a smirking grin.

“Really?” Rio asked, eyes wide.

“I don’t think you’ve met her. Her name’s Mikaela Belmond. You’ve met my fiancée Rosa before, right? She’s her friend. She also attended Celia’s lectures in Rodania.”

“Really? Then I should have invited those two as well.”

Rei grabbed more snacks while humming in thought. “Nah, they wouldn’t feel comfortable in this mansion with so many people. All the princesses and ducal family daughters are here today.”

“That’s true. They’re both from barons’ families, so they don’t normally come into contact with royalty,” Kouta agreed with a grimace.

“I’ve been telling him to introduce her to me. I’ve met Rosa before, but I haven’t seen Mikaela yet. Hurry it up,” Hiroaki said to Kouta.

“That’s right. We have to ask Mikaela how someone as timid as Kouta ended up dating her,” Rei agreed, nodding.

Masato raised his hand, eyes sparkling. “I want to meet her too!”

“So you don’t know how they ended up together either?” Rio asked, looking at Rei and Hiroaki.

“That’s right. I’ve only heard a little through Rosa.”

“It was you who confessed first in the end, right?”

Hiroaki smirked at Kouta.

“That’s enough about me!” Kouta said, evading the question with a red face.

“No no, graduation trips are all about gossiping about love.”

“Right? We’re not letting you sleep tonight until you tell us.”

Rei and Hiroaki refused to back down, reaching for more snacks on the plate.

“M-More importantly, aren’t you two eating too many snacks? You said you were too full to eat another bite earlier,” Kouta said, forcefully changing the topic.

“I have a separate stomach for sweets. Right, Hiroaki?”

“Yeah. It tastes good too. This world has so many sweet snacks, but the ones here suit the Japanese taste better. Goes right down with milk.”

Hiroaki drank his glass of milk, then grabbed another snack and stared at it closely.

“That’s because these were made by Miharu. Of course they’d suit the tastes of a Japanese person,” Masato said casually.

“Wait, you mean this is handmade by Miharu?! Tell me that sooner!” Rei jumped up and grabbed more of the snacks.

“Rei, you have a fiancée...” Kouta muttered, glaring at Rei coldly.

“Idiot. That’s what a separate stomach is for. Miharu’s super cute, you know? She would’ve been the top girl at our school... No, she’d be better than an idol!” Rei insisted firmly.

Kouta sighed wordlessly.

“I know what you’re thinking, Kouta. Your childhood friend Akane is cuter, right?” Hiroaki said in a teasing tone.

“If I was still hung up on Akane, I wouldn’t be dating someone else right now. And Miharu is cuter,” Kouta replied with a frown.

“Oh! He said it!” Hiroaki grinned and threw his arm around Kouta’s shoulder.

“D-Don’t touch me.”

“You know, I always thought highly of you for getting together with Mikaela. I’ve never been a fan of the heroine-from-Earth trope in isekai stories,” Hiroaki said cheerfully, keeping his arm around Kouta.

“Personally, I don’t care if there’s a heroine from Earth in isekai stories,” Rei said, raising his hand to declare his stance.

“I wasn’t asking for your opinion.”

But Hiroaki swiftly brushed him aside.

“That aside, Haruto and Masato are so lucky. They get to eat Miharu’s homemade meals and snacks every day,” Rei whined, pointing at Rio and Masato.

“Lucky? This is Haruto’s mansion,” Kouta said tiredly.

“You can just come visit again then. Though it might not be Miharu who does the cooking. Isn’t that right, Haruto?” Masato said lightly.

“Yeah.” Rio nodded with a chuckle.

“More importantly, isn’t Miharu in love with you?” Hiroaki asked, glancing at Rio’s face.

The sudden change in topic left Rio troubled, unable to deny or confirm those words.

“Oh! No beating around the bush with you, Hiroaki.”

Rei was the one who smirked this time, leaning forward in his seat.

“Well, I had to witness that passionate kiss with my own eyes. Now I *have* to ask about it,” Hiroaki said enthusiastically.

“So what happened after that? We’ve decided there’d be no formalities between us, so there’s no need to hold back anymore.” Rei pressed Rio for answers, his indecent curiosity in full view.

“Nothing happened. The entire thing was an accident that happened against her will, there’s nothing that will happen,” Rio answered with a strained smile.

“No no, you’d definitely feel more aware of each other after that, no?”

“Well, I guess it’s a little awkward now...”

“How did the other girls react? It didn’t seem like they were on edge or anything.”

“They all seem normal to me,” Rio said, answering all of Rei’s questions.

“Really? Does it look that way to you, Masato?” Hiroaki asked with a dubious look.

“Hmm. They didn’t seem different to me. But we went to the castle today, so we weren’t with Miharu for very long.”

Masato gave the same answer as Rio.

“They might be having cat fights behind your back. You never know.”

“That definitely wouldn’t happen.”

Rio denied that with a wry smile.

“I’ve never seen them fight before,” Masato agreed.

“So the world of yuri anime really exists...”

Kouta made a face at Rei’s keen murmuring. “Eww.”

“It’s more harem than yuri, to be honest,” Hiroaki pointed out.

“Good point. Say, do you ever get into any lucky accidents living with so many young girls under the same roof?” Rei asked Rio curiously.

“None.”

“None?! Nothing like seeing them naked while they’re changing for the bath, or opening the toilet door they forgot to lock, or getting into the wrong bed at night?” Rei leaned forward, eager to know if there were any hopes or dreams to be had there.

Rio thought for a brief moment, then replied. “Nothing.”

In reality, the thought of Aishia climbing into bed with him in a half-asleep state had flashed through his mind. Lina had also snuck into his room last night by possessing Miharu. However, Hiroaki was astute.

“Hey, hold up. What was that pause just now?!”

“I-It’s nothing.”

Rio shook his head, voice cracking slightly. Neither of them had entered his room by mistake, so it wasn’t as though he was lying—or so he told himself.

“What?! So there is something!”

“It’s really nothing.” Rei was leaning so far forward, Rio had to lean back.

“What’s the truth, Masato?” Hiroaki turned to Masato instead.

Masato held his chin in thought. “Hmm. Aishia sometimes goes to Haruto’s room when she’s still half-asleep, I guess?”

“See? That isn’t nothing!”

“Ha... Ha ha...” Rio laughed awkwardly, cornered by Hiroaki.

“But both Haruto and Masato have it great. Getting to live under the same roof as so many cute girls every day,” Rei said with jealousy.

“Most of the time I spend in the mansion is with Gouki and Shin, though.”

“Really?”

“It’s a little stifling being in the same space as so many women. Especially as the only man,” Rio said, describing the actual conditions with a grimace.

“I know who Gouki is, but who’s Shin?” Hiroaki asked.

“He came from the Yagumo region with Gouki. I think he lived with Sayo in the same village that Haruto stayed in for a while? He’s the same age as Kouta,” Rei explained.

“Huh, I see,” Kouta said, sounding interested.

“Come to think of it, there was a guy around the same age as us. You should call him here too. We might get to hear more candid stories about Haruto,” Hiroaki suggested.

“Shall I go call him, then?”

They might end up teasing Rio about his relationship with Sayu, but he had no reason to refuse their request to expand their social circle. Although he was a little reluctant, Rio headed out to call Shin.

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While Rio and the others were having their boys' party in the parlor, a large-scale girls' party was being held in the dining room of the mansion.

Out of the residents of the mansion, Miharu, Aki, Satsuki, Celia, Celia's mother Monica, Latifa, Charlotte, Aishia, Sora, Sara, Orphia, Alma, Komomo, and Sayo were in attendance. They were entertaining the guest lineup of Christina, Flora, Roanna, Lilianna, Liselotte, and Aria.

All twenty of them could have surrounded a single table, but in order to have more intimate conversations, they decided to split into four groups.

As a result, they made the following groups of five:

Group one consisted of Celia, Sara, Alma, Christina, and Aria.

Group two consisted of Aishia, Sora, Orphia, Monica, and Komomo.

Group three consisted of Latifa, Sayo, Flora, Roanna, and Liselotte.

Group four consisted of Satsuki, Miharu, Aki, Charlotte, and Lilianna.

Using two long rectangular tables, groups one and two sat at one table, while groups three and four sat around another.

First, at group one...

"I see, so the professor had such an era too."

"Yes. She may act mature now, but in her lower elementary years, she was the most careless scatterbrain. She was always tripping over nothing, and she could get so immersed in her books she'd be late to class."

Aria was telling Christina about Celia's days as a student. Hearing the unexpected side of her teacher's past made Christina giggle in amusement.

"Celia's still a little scatterbrained now. Like when she was looking everywhere for something that was in her hand all along."

"Yes. Just the other day she got the shampoo and body soap in the bathroom mixed up."

Sara and Alma also revealed some of Celia's daily slipups.

"E-Enough already..." Celia shrank back with a red face.

Meanwhile, Aishia, Orphia, Sora, Komomo, and Monica had gathered in group two.

"Hee hee, how adorable. When Celia was this little, she was already

attending the Royal Academy, so we were living apart."

Monica had Sora on her lap and was patting her head. Sora's physical appearance was that of an elementary school student, so Monica seemed to be making up for the time she had missed out on with Celia.

"Hmph..." Sora was like a sulking cat. She had an embarrassed pout on her face but remained still without complaint.

"It's rare to see Sora like this."

"She won't let us touch her head, so I'm jealous."

Sora was generally irritable around everyone who wasn't Rio, so Komomo and Orphia were both watching her in surprise.

"Don't get the wrong idea. Sora is just following Master Haruto's orders to be nice to you all."

"What a good girl you are, obeying your instructions. Here, have a sweet."

"Yum!"

Sora ate the sweet Monica picked for her with her small mouth.

"She might be happy she gained a mother," Aishia guessed, watching her chew enthusiastically.

"A-Aishia!" Sora yelled, face bright red.

Then, at group three's table with Latifa, Sayo, Flora, Roanna, and Liselotte...

"I'm glad we can talk again, Lady Sayo," Flora said to Sayo cheerfully. Indeed, Flora and Sayo were lightly acquainted. When Sayo first began to live at the mansion, Flora had visited the mansion and was introduced to her as Rio's friend. However, that had been the only time they had been able to talk properly.

"Y-Yes, it's nice to see you again, Princess Flora. I'm honored you remember me."

"Of course I remember. I told you before that I'd love to be your friend. Did you forget?" Flora asked with a sad face.

"N-No, of course not. I just didn't think it was proper for me to be friends with a princess... I'm not even sure I should be here right now..."

Sayo was living in the mansion as Rio's friend, but she devoted herself to working in the shadows whenever guests came over. She appeared to be Rio's servant, and she originally came from a small village, so she couldn't help feeling inferior before the princesses.

"That's because I requested it. Like I said before, you can forget that I'm a princess when talking to me."

It was normally impossible for a servant to sit in the company of a princess, but apparently exceptions could be made if the princess herself requested it.

“Are you sure...?” Sayo asked nervously, glancing at Latifa for help.

“I don’t know either...”

Latifa looked uncertain as well. After all, no matter how much Flora insisted it was fine, it was possible that Roanna, who was there as her attendant, would find it improper. Rio, Satsuki, and the other residents of the mansion kept their status differences to a minimum in their daily life, but it was a different matter when they were hosting guests they weren’t so close to.

“You don’t mind, do you, Roanna?” Flora asked, noticing their gaze on Roanna.

“I’m fine with it, but only within Sir Amakawa’s mansion. It’d be a problem outside,” Roanna said with a slightly troubled nod.

“There you have it! Tonight is a sleepover, and this is an all-girls party to deepen our friendship, so let’s get along well. I also wanted to talk to Lady Suzune and Lady Liselotte, since we were seated separately during dinner.”

Flora clapped her hands together and smiled as bright as the sun.

“I did too. Oh, I haven’t greeted Lady Roanna properly yet! I’m Onii... I mean, I’m Haruto Amakawa’s little sister, Suzune Amakawa.”

Latifa introduced herself to Roanna, who was seated diagonally to the right of her. She seemed to be happy to be introducing herself with the Amakawa last name, as she was blushing shyly.

“I’m Roanna Fontaine. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Roanna said with a bow.

Sayo realized she was yet to give a proper greeting as well and hurriedly bowed to Roanna and Liselotte. “And I’m Sayo. It’s nice to meet you, Lady Roanna—and you, Lady Liselotte.”

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Liselotte replied brightly.

“Oh yeah, Sayo hasn’t met Liselotte properly either. Please be friends with her as well.”

“Is Sayo also a sibling to you and Sir Amakawa, Lady Suzune?” Roanna asked, looking between Latifa’s and Sayo’s faces.

“N-No, I could never...!” Sayo waved her hands in denial.

“Sayo is Onii—I mean, my brother’s friend.”

Unable to shake the habit of calling Rio “Onii-chan,” Latifa corrected herself.

“I don’t think I’m worthy of calling him a friend either... I merely had the fortune of meeting Sir Haruto during his travels.”

“I see... I noticed there’s a lot of people with black hair in this mansion, including Sir Gouki and Lady Kayoko. Are they all here because of that?”

“Yes, we all serve Sir Haruto.”

“I see now...” Roanna said in understanding, but there was a thoughtful look on her face.

“Onii-chan considers them his friends, not vassals.”

“Some things cannot be allowed. We’re living in his mansion, so we can’t risk making any blunders when there are guests visiting.”

“I should be the one saying that... Tell me if I make any mistakes here, Liselotte,” Latifa said, quietly looking at Liselotte to her right.

“Heh heh. You’ll be fine, Suzune,” Liselotte said, giving her stamp of approval.

“You two seem quite close.”

Roanna expressed interest in the relationship between Latifa and Liselotte.

“Yes, we were just saying today how we’re basically sisters. Isn’t that right, Liselotte?”

“Yes, Suzune and I have gotten along since the day we first met.”

Latifa entwined her arms with Liselotte, who accepted it as though it was completely natural. It was an exchange that showed how close the two were.

“That must be nice...” Flora muttered enviously.

“What is, Princess Flora?” Latifa asked, tilting her head with a blank look.

“I have an older sister, but I’ve always wanted a younger sister... I-If it’s okay with you, Lady Suzune, would you be willing to treat me like a sister as well?” Flora found her courage to make a request of Latifa.

“Huh? Umm...”

“Why don’t you try it? Since tonight is a sleepover,” Liselotte said encouragingly.

“So... Just ‘Flora’?” Latifa said hesitantly.

What a sweet sound that was. Flora basked in happiness before replying. “Flora, Flora... Yes, that’s me!”

“Flora,” Latifa repeated once more, this time sounding more natural.

“Thank you very much, Lady Latifa!”

Overcome with emotion, Flora thanked her. At the other table, Christina was watching her little sister with a soft expression.

“Lady Suzune, could you call Roanna in the same way?” Flora requested more.

“M-Me?”

Roanna was taken aback by the sudden focus on her.

“Yes. You don’t have a little sister either, right?”

Apparently to Flora, not having a little sister meant she had to be in want of

one. And with it coming from the royalty she revered, Roanna had no reason to refuse.

“U-Umm... Then can I ask the same, if you don’t mind?” Roanna said shyly.

“Err... Sister Roanna?”

She was silent at first.

“What do you think, Roanna?” Flora asked excitedly.

“Well... I can certainly see the appeal.”

It seemed the desire to be an older sister was there after all. Roanna looked embarrassed as she blushed.

“Right?!”

Having shared the joy of being an older sister, Flora looked triumphant.

“In that case, I’d prefer it if you didn’t call me Lady Suzune anymore. It feels a little silly, heh heh.”

This time, Latifa was the one to make a request.

“B-But what can we call you instead?”

“You can call me Suzune like Liselotte does, or if there’s another name you’ve always wanted to call your little sister, you can do that too!”

“Th-The ultimate question... My sister calls me by my name without the title, so maybe I could do the same... What should I do, Roanna?”

“H-Huh? Let’s see...”

The sudden question left Flora shocked. Roanna also hummed in contemplation. After thinking for a while...

“Suzune?” Flora said, calling Latifa by her name.

“Okay, Flora!” Latifa replied brightly.

And while group three steadily deepened their friendship, beside them in group four, which consisted of Satsuki, Miharu, Aki, Charlotte, and Lilianna...

“There’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Charlotte said out of the blue, grinning. “Are you and Sir Masato interested in each other, Princess Lilianna?”

She looked at Lilianna, who was sitting across from her.

“You sure don’t hold back, Char...”

Satsuki had a feigned tone of reproach in her voice, but she had probably been wondering about it herself, since she had a curious grin on her face.

“Lady Suzune once said that all-girls parties are about love-related gossip. Lady Aki must be interested in her little brother’s romantic life too, no?”

“Huh? Well... I’m not completely disinterested,” Aki said, glancing at Lilianna’s side profile. Miharu also followed her gaze in curiosity.

Lilianna shrank back in discomfort. “Erm...”

“What are we talking about? Love stories?!”

Overhearing their topic, Latifa jumped into their conversation.

“Please tell us too,” Flora said, joining the conversation with eager interest. With that, Satsuki’s and Latifa’s groups instantly merged together.

And that wasn’t all. It seemed everyone was starved of love-related gossip. Monica also sensed the waves of love in the air and leaned towards them from the other table. Before they knew it, Celia’s group had joined them in a tight encirclement enthusiastically discussing Lilianna and Masato’s romantic rumors.

“Why don’t we just bring Masato over?”

“Wha— Lady Suzune?!”

There was no time like the present. Before Lilianna could stop her, Latifa had run out of the dining room.

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Meanwhile, at the boys-only party...

Shin had been in the middle of drinking when he joined them, so everyone besides Masato also began drinking alcohol.

“Then, even though he gave Sayo a hairpin, he just up and left the village.”

Shin pointed at Rio as he told them about what happened in the Yagumo region.

“Seriously? That’s awful, Haruto.”

“Yeah, what a sinful man.”

“That’s right. Sayo still treasures that hairpin, you know?”

A red-faced Rei, Hiroaki, and Shin said respectively, denouncing Rio.

“That Sayo sure has guts, though. She followed after Haruto even though she was rejected, coming all the way here to the Strahl region,” Rei said.

“Sounds like he should take responsibility and marry her,” Hiroaki added.

“That’s right! Take responsibility!” Shin chimed in last.

“The three of you are getting a little too drunk...” Rio said, completely overwhelmed by them.

“Ha ha, they’ve hit it off with each other.”

“Must be tough being popular.”

Although Kouta and Masato gave Rio pitying looks, they were enjoying the situation.

“Who’re you interested in the most anyway, Haruto? You’ve been living with so many cute girls who adore you. How come you haven’t dated any of them?” Rei asked bluntly, holding a glass in one hand.

“I can’t think about anything like that right now, so even if you ask me...”

“Huh?! And you call yourself a man?! You gotta have the guts to marry them all!”

“That’s right! Marry Sayo!”

The drunkards continued pestering Rio until a knock came from the door. It immediately opened afterward, revealing Latifa.

“Is Masato here?” she asked.

“What do you want, Suzune?”

“I’d like to ask you something. Is that okay?”

“Huh? Me?” Masato pointed at himself blankly.

“Yeah. Is that okay?” Latifa was grinning, but there was an intensity to her

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that refused to take no for an answer.

"Y-Yeah. That's fine..." With no reason to refuse, Masato nodded hesitantly.

"Good. Let's go."

Thus, Latifa took Masato to the girls' party.

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"I've brought Masato!"

Latifa returned to the dining room, pulling Masato by the hand; all the girls participating in the party were gathered there.

It was an overwhelming number of girls. Feeling like he had wandered into an all-girls school, Masato stiffened at the pressure.

"Y-Yeah... What is this?"

"Now, sit over there, Masato."

Latifa led him by the hand to the seat opposite of Lilianna.

Ah, I have a bad feeling about this, Masato thought instinctively.

"Y-You know, things were getting real exciting over there. Shin came over and started telling us stories of Haruto's romantic escapades. Oh, maybe you should call them over too?"

Sorry, Haruto, Masato apologized in his head as he tried to stand up, using Rio's gossip as bait to change the topic.

"Onii-chan's romantic escapades...?" The look on Latifa and everyone else's faces changed.

Okay! Masato was sure of his victory, but that vision quickly crumbled away like a mirage.

"I do want to hear more about that in detail later. But like I said, I have something to ask you." Latifa grabbed Masato's shoulders and grinned as she pushed him back down into the chair.

"R-Right. What is it...?"

Ah, I'm not getting away from this one, Masato instantly thought to himself. Thus, Masato may or may not have learned the terror of a harem.

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No matter how much fun there was to have, everything had to come to an end eventually.

After Masato was interrogated, the other members of the boys' party joined the girls' party. They were thoroughly questioned about what they discussed at

their party, resulting in several red-faced people and Sayo getting mad at Shin.

The informal social gathering was a big hit, but it was finally time for things to come to an end. Everyone was disappointed, but it was long past their usual sleeping hour.

As the participants left the dining room one after another, Liselotte called out to Miharu and Aki.

“Miharu, Aki,” she said.

“Yes?”

“Sorry to stop you as you’re about to go to sleep. There’s something I’d like to ask the two of you.”

“What is it?”

“I’m thinking of developing a new product for the Ricca Guild, and I was hoping to receive your assistance in it.”

“Our assistance?” Miharu tilted her head with a blank look. She had given the Ricca Guild several of her baking recipes before, but she had no idea what kind of product would involve Aki as well.

“Yes. The product this time is fashion-related, not food. I’d love to hear both of your opinions from a Japanese perspective,” Liselotte explained.

“I’d be happy to help, but...”

“You’re not going to invite Satsuki as well?” Aki said, asking the obvious.

“There’s quite a lot to check, so it’ll involve visiting the actual stores in person. Considering Satsuki’s position, it won’t be easy for her to go out like that.”

“I see.”

“If it isn’t too much trouble for you, I’d appreciate your assistance. Of course, you’ll be fairly compensated for your time,” Liselotte said, bowing her head.

“As long as you don’t mind an amateur opinion...” Miharu was the first to agree.

“I’m okay with it too. Though I won’t know any better than Miharu.” Aki also nodded with a strained smile.

“Thank you very much, it’ll be a great help. I’ll have to consult Princess Charlotte first, but I’ll have more details within a few days. Please keep that in mind.”

With Liselotte’s request, the day came to an end.

Chapter 5: Conflict Between Parent and Child

Around the time Christina and the others had just left for Rio's mansion, Duke Gustav Huguenot had summoned a girl to the guest house.

"Sorry to call you here so suddenly, Elise."

The girl's name was Elise Brandt, and she was the daughter of a count family in Beltrum. She was born as a high-ranking noble, but she normally had nothing to do with Duke Huguenot.

"Not at all..."

Duke Huguenot and Elise were the only two people in the room. Was he going to ask her to be his mistress? Or was there another reason? At any rate, Elise had no idea why she was summoned, so she could only shake her head stiffly.

"There's no need to be so nervous, I just want to ask you something in private. I'd like you to promise not to speak a word of this to anyone else. Can you do that?" Duke Huguenot said, explaining the reason he had called her here.

"I understand."

In noble society, ranks were absolute. If someone of higher standing made a request like this, there was no way of refusing. Elise nodded timidly.

"Good. Then I'll get straight to the point. Around five years ago, when you were in your sixth year at the Academy, an outdoor drill was held. Do you recall that?"

"Yes..."

Duke Huguenot cut to the chase. When Elise nodded, a look of guilt flashed across her face—and Duke Huguenot didn't miss it. He narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Do you remember the incident that occurred during the drill?"

"There was a monster attack on the students."

"No, not that one," Duke Huguenot dismissed immediately.

Elise paused awkwardly. "Princess Flora nearly fell off a cliff," she eventually said.

"At the time, you were one of the witnesses to Princess Flora's incident."

“Yes...”

“In a wounded state, Stewart—my fool of a son—bumped into Princess Flora and caused her to nearly fall off the cliff. But before that, another student had pushed him into her. Ultimately, that student had to take blame for the incident. Isn’t that right?”

Duke Huguenot listed the facts without any emotion. It was clear Elise was getting more nervous with every passing moment.

“I did not see which student it was who pushed Stewart,” she said, voice cracking.

“Is it just me, or does it sound like you’re not telling the truth?”

“That’s not true...”

Her eyes were clearly darting about the place.

Duke Huguenot sighed in a troubled manner, then stared at her with a look of resolve. “I think you actually saw who it was that pushed my son. Am I wrong?”

Elise hesitated. “Why are you asking this now?” she asked warily.

“I decided I want to know the truth,” Duke Huguenot answered immediately.

Elise’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Like I said at the start, this is just between you and me. Even if you give me a different testimony to what you gave in the past, you will not be blamed for anything. So will you please tell me the truth as you remember it?”

And as Duke Huguenot hoped...

“It was indeed your son, Stewart, who bumped into Princess Flora. There’s also no doubt that this was why she nearly fell off the cliff.” Elise slowly began recalling her memories of the incident.

“Are you saying there’s an inconsistency elsewhere?”

“It was a different person who initially pushed Stewart. Stewart insisted it was the black-haired commoner who shoved him, but it was actually a different male student who did it...”

Duke Huguenot pinched the bridge of his nose with a frown. “Who... No, please tell me everything you remember.”

“Everyone was in a panic because of the monster attack. Stewart was wounded in the process and grabbed another male student to ask for his help... But that student thrust him aside because he was in his way and ended up throwing him into Princess Flora.”

“So the commoner student shouldn’t have been blamed for the incident, you say?”

“Yes... All he did was save Princess Flora, falling off the cliff in her stead.”

“So how did he end up shouldering the blame?”

“Because Stewart claimed the commoner was the one who shoved him...”

The hand Duke Huguenot was covering his eyes with was shaking. But no matter how much he hid his eyes, it was clear at a glance that his mouth was twisted in an enraged frown.

“Th-The student who pushed Stewart agreed with Stewart’s claim. Stewart was really menacing at that moment, so I couldn’t speak up...”

Elise explained herself in a panic, either out of guilt for revealing the truth so late, or out of fear of Duke Huguenot’s fury.

“No, you’re not at fault here. I’m sorry my son has caused so much trouble.”

Duke Huguenot took a deep breath to calm down, then removed his hand from his eyes.

“Once again, I must remind you not to tell anyone else what you told me today. As soon as you step out of this room, forget everything,” he emphasized.

“Y-Yes sir.”

“Good. You may leave now.”

“Please excuse me...”

Elise bowed nervously, then got up out of her chair and hurried out of the room. Once the door closed, Duke Huguenot was alone once again.

Silence stretched for a long moment.

“Grr...!”

Duke Huguenot swung his right hand down and slammed the table in anger. A dull thud echoed through the room. For someone normally so calm, it was a show of extreme emotion coming from him.

“That moron...!”

A fatal trap had been sleeping somewhere he had never expected. Just how many times was he going to drag the family name through mud? Duke Huguenot gritted his teeth.

The orphan named Rio, who had vanished from Beltrum after being falsely accused of a crime and the mysterious Honorary Knight named Haruto Amakawa, who was climbing in power in Galarc. Just yesterday he would have never connected the two, yet today he was facing the possibility of them being the same person.

While it isn’t confirmed yet, it’s extremely likely...

During the battle with the golem, the man named Haruto Amakawa had been referred to as Rio. Celia, who for some reason was close to Haruto, once taught

the class Rio was in. The way Christina was oddly reserved when it came to Haruto, and how she was once classmates with Rio during her time at the Royal Academy...

Just by adding one piece of information, the dots all joined each other one after another. There was too much circumstantial evidence to dismiss it all as a coincidence.

Suppose he's the same person. Celia definitely knows his identity already. What do I do? Who knows what will happen if the past becomes public...

The biggest problem was how deeply Duke Huguenot had been involved in blaming Rio for the crime he had never committed. Stewart may have created the problem, but Duke Huguenot himself had pulled the strings to clean up the mess.

But back then, the Arbor faction had been gaining power, so Duke Huguenot had to do everything he could to avoid being caught in a scandal. Making his son take responsibility for the Second Princess nearly falling off a cliff was out of the question.

That's why he had blindly believed Stewart's testimony without investigation and arranged for the blame to be placed on Rio, who had disappeared from the scene. As an orphan, Rio had been an extremely convenient target to use as a scapegoat. There had been no reason to hesitate.

It had been the best move at the time. But now...

Now, Rio was the Honorary Knight of the Galarc Kingdom. King Francois had deep trust in him, and he was also close to their hero, Satsuki. He was no longer a person Duke Huguenot could afford to make an enemy of.

Now, it was the worst possible move I could have made. To think the person I discarded as a scapegoat would be the person we needed most...

Bitter regret washed over Duke Huguenot. If he hadn't looked down on Rio for being an orphan and persecuted him, if he had treated him with fairness and respect—they may have received Rio's assistance by now.

In fact, if the truth of how he had framed Rio ever came to light, Duke Huguenot's life as a noble would be over.

Even worse, I sent an assassin after him to silence him... If that's ever exposed, there'll be no way of excusing myself.

It would have been troublesome if Rio ever returned and gave his own testimony. That's why Duke Huguenot had sent the rare werebeast he had raised to track his scent and assassinate him. However, that assassin had never returned.

She must have been killed or left to die somewhere...

Up until just yesterday, Duke Huguenot had banished all memory of the assassin girl, Latifa, to a corner of his mind.

Either way, it's clear she failed at the assassination. At least she had a Collar of Submission on, so she wouldn't have been able to speak even if she was caught or defeated.

Indeed, back then, Latifa had been unable to speak in any way that disadvantaged her master due to the Collar of Submission. If she tried to pass information on while knowing it could harm her master, an agonizing pain would run through her brain. There was no way Duke Huguenot would have known that Rio had used spirit arts to imitate extremely difficult dispel magic to remove the collar.

As long as she doesn't speak, there's no way for anyone to prove I was the one who ordered the assassination. I should be more worried about information leaking from somewhere else. Right now, Queen Christina and the others are at his mansion...

Before realizing the truth, he would have considered it a good thing for the Restoration to become closer to him. But that was no longer the case. Christina, Flora, and Roanna had all been on the same team as Rio during the outdoor drill. And that wasn't all—Christina and Roanna had been Rio's classmates. Flora would have interacted with him elsewhere before too.

Master Rio.

The image of Sora calling Rio's name flashed through Duke Huguenot's head once again. Rio and Sora had teleported to the rooftop garden to face the golem. Christina, Flora, and Roanna had been standing right beside him, so they would have heard Sora's words as well.

If I've noticed it, Queen Christina and the others will be able to notice it too. Or have they noticed already and are feigning ignorance? What if they're gathering in the mansion right now to discuss the possibility...

It was possible they had noticed this a while ago. All kinds of potential scenarios flooded Duke Huguenot's head, muddling his thoughts.

Should I disclose everything after all?

Duke Huguenot ruffled his hair with his right hand fretfully.

In reality, when he had met Christina earlier, his plan had been to bring up Rio to her. That was also why he'd had Stewart attend the meeting with him. But he had been unable to organize his thoughts in time and backed out at the last minute.

The reason for that was most likely as already mentioned—he feared what would happen if the fact he had tried to frame Rio was revealed.

It was only natural to fear it. The wrong move could result in Duke Huguenot losing his position, resulting in the Restoration disintegrating.

But even then...

The Restoration needs his power. It's absolutely essential.

Duke Huguenot still believed that Rio was necessary to the future of the Restoration. That was why he was desperately racking his brains for the correct way of gaining Rio's assistance.

It shouldn't be impossible. He's helped us in the past with our dilemmas, even if that was because of Celia's presence...

Of course, he didn't think Rio had forgotten about the outdoor drill incident either. The first possibility Duke Huguenot had considered was Rio getting close to them for revenge. It was a scenario he had gone over in his head many times now, but...

He's had plenty of chances to get his revenge on us. But he didn't. He's intent on hiding his past.

In other words, Rio probably had no intention of seeking revenge. And he didn't want to bring up the past again either.

There's no reason for me to enter the lion's den on purpose, is there?

If he was to seek Rio's assistance for the Restoration, wouldn't it be better to maintain his ignorance? But considering Rio's character, a sincere apology might be necessary first.

I have to make a decision before the next time I meet Queen Christina.

Duke Huguenot was at his wits' end for the rest of the night.

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Meanwhile, at the same guest house of the Galarc Castle, Stewart Huguenot was sitting in a chair in his room, legs shaking in small but fierce movements. The next moment, he stood up and paced the room restlessly. His face was pale with intense panic.

"Damn it!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. The reason for his current state was clear.

"Why?! Why is it him? Why does he have to appear now...!"

Rio, the boy who once disappeared after being framed with a crime, had potentially reappeared nearby as the man named Haruto Amakawa.

No, wait! Is it really him though? Is Haruto Amakawa...Rio...?

His thoughts were all over the place. Or rather, he refused to believe it. He didn't want to think of Rio and Haruto Amakawa as the same person. He wanted them to be different people. But there was strong proof of them being the same person.

I couldn't understand why Professor Celia was so close to that man, but now...

If Haruto Amakawa was Rio, then it made sense. When Stewart attended the Royal Academy, there were rumors of Celia being close to Rio. There were many male students who weren't amused by that, and Stewart had been one of them.

If so, that means the professor knows his identity. She would have heard about what happened at the outdoor drill from him. On top of that, she's staying with him...

In other words, Celia must blindly believe in Rio's innocence.

He too would have heard about what happened after he fell off the cliff from the professor. Like what part of the story was inconsistent and how it was handled after...

That was probably why he had vanished after the outdoor drill. The reality was that Rio had directly witnessed Stewart giving his false testimony, but Stewart had no way of knowing that.

He must know about how I lied...

The guilt of the lie he had told made Stewart stiffen. The truth was, he knew exactly who had pushed him during the outdoor drill. He had known, yet claimed that it had been Rio who pushed him.

No, but there weren't any other witnesses who saw it. At the very least, neither Princess Christina nor Princess Flora saw anything. Roanna shouldn't have either...

In that case, was there anyone else who could declare he had been lying? Even if Rio pleaded innocence, there was no way of proving it as long as Stewart didn't change his testimony.

That's right. There's no evidence. He knew there was no way of proving his innocence, so he changed his name and started a new life.

The situation still favored him, Stewart concluded with a much more relaxed smile.

But how does that explain the different color of his hair? Is he really a different person after all? Or is it the effect of an artifact that can affect other

people's perception?

Stewart didn't know that Rio had an artifact that could change his hair color. Christina had traveled from Celia's house to Rodania with altered hair color too, but there were very few people in the Restoration who knew that.

Whatever. Either way, I just have to insist he was the one who pushed me. Even if he pleads innocence or claims that I'm lying, nothing will change...

Stewart tried to reassure himself he was fine, but his expression was still stiff.

What was that lowly commoner even thinking? Not only did he have the nerve to appear before us so boldly, he even invited Queen Christina to the mansion...

It was hard to believe these were the actions of a man who had committed a crime in the past, Stewart thought in disbelief. But that thought only lasted for a brief moment.

No, that's just the scum he is. He's so desperate for validation, he couldn't hold back his craving for the limelight. Being a lowborn meant he'd never received the approval of others, so he was dying to be treated specially. A clear inferiority complex, if you ask me. Greedy filth. Hmph.

In order to dispel his lingering anxiety, Stewart let out a condescending snort. He was trying to keep calm by looking down on Rio.

He probably changed his name because he wanted to hide his dirty past as an orphan of the slums. But once he got a taste of the higher world at the Royal Academy, he yearned for nobility. That's why he started gaining fame in the Galarc Kingdom—because he couldn't resist his need for validation despite his shameful past.

Stewart sneered, convinced that this was the truth. However...

But he really is a shallow fool. He doesn't understand how small noble society truly is. He must have thought he wouldn't have to face any of Beltrum's nobles if he left the kingdom. Then, of all people, it had to be us...

Stewart suddenly gasped as though he had realized something.

Wait, was it really a coincidence? When we were attacked by monsters in Amande, he appeared before us. Was he following us on purpose? What if he held a grudge for what happened at the outdoor drill...?

The guilt of what Stewart had done haunted him, making him suspect Rio was trying to exact revenge on them.

That's right. Alphonse vanished immediately after he appeared in Amande. And at the Ricca Guild's restaurant, he made me get on my knees and bow to him...

Had he been waiting for a chance to get revenge the entire time? The Huguenot faction's downfall from the Beltrum Kingdom would have been the perfect opportunity. As Stewart recalled the events of the past, the humiliation he felt rose once again.

"Damn it! Are you saying that the lowly commoner made me bow to him?!" he yelled furiously.

He must have been ecstatic! How dare he look down on me...!

Stewart shook from head to toe with rage. The humiliation he felt was intense. "You're below, I'm above"—that had been the unmistakable status. But it had now collapsed, and their positions were reversed—something which he couldn't bear.

An artifact that can alter people's perceptions and memories. Wouldn't it have been easy for him to use that and control Alphonse, making him cause trouble in his drunk state?

That was something that would be impossible to prove, but...

That has to be it. He's trying to get revenge on us. It has to be his fault Alphonse vanished from Rodania. No, what if he was killed...?

Convinced that was the truth, Stewart looked horrified.

Father has noticed his other identity. Otherwise he wouldn't have asked me about him. But is he seriously trying to gain his assistance? He might be targeting Queen Christina and the others. Not to mention me...

There was no telling when he would be stabbed in the back. The fact that Rio had a motive to do so made Stewart shudder.

No... Even if we gained his assistance, I'd never be able to trust him. Who knows what vulgar demands he'll make in return.

In the otherwise silent room, the twitching of his legs echoed loudly.

Wait a minute. What if he requests I be punished as revenge?

Stewart's entire body froze.

Would father abandon me...?

He had been excited when Duke Huguenot had allowed him to sit in on his meeting with Christina, thinking he was finally redeeming himself. But what if he had been terribly mistaken? Stewart's face paled further.

Shouldn't he need evidence to do that? Just like how I need evidence that he resents us and killed Alphonse with his own hands... But if I don't get rid of him, he will get rid of me.

If he could find proof that Rio had killed Alphonse, Rio would be unable to do anything about the incident at the outdoor drill.

But how do I find any proof Alphonse was killed by him when it happened so long ago?

Back then, Alphonse had gone to investigate the forests near Amande with the other knights of the Restoration. The monster attack on Amande had happened immediately after, so it was concluded that he had been killed by the swarms of monsters in the forest. But no corpse had been recovered, so he was still technically missing.

"Damn it!" Stewart yelled again, losing his temper.

It's impossible; there's no way of finding proof... Even if I ask to go to Amande, I'll never receive approval.

So what could he do?

Is there anything else? Like a weakness of his...

Stewart's legs started shaking again out of fear of Rio.

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The next morning, by a path near the guest house...

Stewart had made a promise to meet up with Duke Gregory between his patrol shifts. His right foot was tapping against the stone path restlessly.

I wanted more time to think...

In the end, he had spent the whole night thinking. While he wanted nothing more than to skip their meeting, he couldn't bear having Duke Gregory prying into his secrets behind his back.

He had considered consulting his father, but there was no guarantee he would protect him. Thus, Stewart chose to meet Duke Gregory of his own accord.

Damn it! Why do I have to go through this? Stewart thought to himself bitterly.

"Looks like someone didn't have a good night's sleep," a voice said. Duke Gregory had appeared.

It seems I might be able to hear something interesting today.

He expressed concern for Stewart's well-being, but his mouth was curled into a smile.

"I couldn't sleep well..." Stewart replied sullenly. Although he was in front of another kingdom's duke, he didn't have the composure to control his own emotions.

"Now, what do you have to tell me?"

"I'm guessing you won't be satisfied if I said it was nothing."

“Of course not.”

“I have no proof of this...and it would be dangerous to make a fuss without any evidence. Are you willing to accept that?” Stewart asked as a last resort.

“Hearing that makes me even more curious,” Duke Gregory said with a dismissive laugh.

Stewart began to speak in resignation. “I don’t want to call him an acquaintance...but there was a guy I once knew who committed a crime and went on the run.”

“Oh?” Duke Gregory’s reaction was calm. In fact, he was intently focused on keeping his emotions off his face to avoid giving the other party any advantage.

“His name was Rio. That’s why I was so surprised when I heard that name from you yesterday.”

“But if you were familiar with his face, wouldn’t you have noticed him earlier?”

“Yes. That’s why I said I don’t have proof. Rio vanished nearly five years ago. He’s grown older now, and his facial structure has changed. His hair color was also different back then. I can’t say for sure if they’re the same person.”

“Indeed, puberty can change people dramatically...” Duke Gregory murmured. However, even if facial structures changed, hair color didn’t. Strange.

But it was at this point that Stewart gave him his daring conclusion.

“However, I think there’s a high chance they’re the same person,” he said.

“What?”

“Like I said, I don’t have proof. But he’s lying about his background.”

“Hmm. If what you say is true, he should be tried for his crimes...”

At present, this was all Stewart’s assumption. Duke Gregory could only take the information as any other rumor.

“Yes, he should be tried—but there’s no proof. He’s secured his current position as a noble. Defaming the Honorary Knight with no evidence would only lead to my own arrest,” Stewart said.

“If he truly has a dirty past, it will affect our kingdom as well... But why do you think they’re the same person when you don’t have any proof?”

“The same people he was close to back then are situated around Haruto Amakawa now. That’s too much to be dismissed as a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Oh?”

If what he says is true, we may be able to expose Amakawa’s murky past...

But it's too weak. There needs to be more proof to censure him.

If Stewart's testimony was true, it could be enough to shake Rio up even now. But one wrong move, and it could be considered defamation. Duke Gregory wasn't willing to risk that without evidence, especially if he was to be the source of the information.

Whatever move is made next needs to be initiated by this boy.

And so, Duke Gregory immediately decided to make Stewart act advantageously for himself. But first, in order to check whether there was any value in using him, Duke Gregory questioned his next move.

"Do you plan on censuring Amakawa, Stewart?" he asked.

"It depends on what proof I can find. I know I won't have any chance if I just bring it up now."

"No doubt about that. So what will you do?"

"There's nothing I can do but search for something to drag him down with. Though I doubt it'll be easy to find such a thing."

"In that case, why don't you try explaining things in more detail? I may be able to assist."

"Are you sure?"

Stewart was wide-eyed with surprise. He seemed grateful for the offer of help, but there was a look of caution in his reaction as well.

"Like I said, if Amakawa has a dark past, it will be our kingdom's problem too."

"I see..."

"But it all depends on what kind of past he's hiding. You said he had committed a crime, but what exactly was that crime?"

"I don't mind telling you, but only if you agree to my conditions."

Oh? How interesting.

Duke Gregory grinned. For a pawn in his plan to censure Rio, that was an appropriate response.

"Very well. State your demands."

"First, I want you to leave the confrontation to me. That means you won't dig into his past without my permission. I want you to keep silent about his past until I'm ready to censure him. In exchange, I'll share whatever information you want."

Stewart listed his conditions, hoping to seize the initiative for himself.

"Hmm. Is that all?"

"If you agree that the past I'm about to tell you is evil, then I'd like you to

promise you'll help me bring him down. That's all."

"Got it. In that case, that won't be a problem. Let's relocate—we can get your conditions written down on paper."

Duke Gregory readily agreed with Stewart's conditions. If Stewart himself was offering to stand in the line of fire, he had no reason to refuse. In fact, it suited his intentions perfectly.

"Is it okay to leave a trail like that?" Stewart asked.

"Of course. You wouldn't feel assured with a mere verbal promise either, no?"

"I appreciate it."

Stewart also seemed to feel more trust towards Duke Gregory for being willing to put their agreement to paper. He was smiling for the first time today, exhaling in relief.

However, Duke Gregory hadn't offered to leave a paper trail of the conditions out of goodwill. As a noble with experience in the way of the world, he would never suggest something for another person's benefit. He was only doing it because a paper trail was in his own interest.

Hmph. Verbally promising to help leaves me open to bearing responsibility for anything. It'd be better to have my involvement objectively written down.

He planned to assist enough to get a say in the discussions if Rio was successfully censured and would have the ability to shift all the responsibility onto Stewart if everything failed.

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They moved to a meeting room that Duke Gregory had been granted in the castle and wrote the conditions Stewart had listed down on paper.

"Will this do?" Duke Gregory asked.

"Yes, this is fine."

"Now, let's hear what you have to say about Amakawa's past."

Duke Gregory looked at Stewart expectantly once both copies of the contract were signed and gestured for him to give his statement.

"Very well."

Stewart steeled himself and began to explain Rio's past to Duke Gregory. However, he made sure to hide the part where he had lied to shift the blame onto Rio, and exaggerated a bit to make himself sound better.

In short, this was the story of the boy named Rio. Originally an orphan from

the slums, Rio pushed Stewart at an outdoor drill, which ultimately resulted in Flora nearly falling off a cliff. Rio was to be punished for this, but he disappeared before he could be caught. Thus, it was possible that Rio still held resentment for Stewart. He could have been plotting his revenge when he made such a timely appearance at Amande, and Alphonse may have been killed by him as part of that, and so forth.

Thus, Stewart finished his explanation.

"Pfft. Bwa ha ha! I see. If that is the truth, then it is indeed something that cannot be ignored. We cannot have the Honorary Knight of our kingdom be a criminal that attempted to kill a foreign royal and fled before capture."

Duke Gregory imagined the fallout of such a truth being exposed and was unable to hold back his laughter.

"And?"

"Yes, I am happy to actively assist you."

"Thank you so much!"

"It's too early to thank me. Like you said at the beginning, we're lacking critical evidence to prove that the two are the same person. Creating a fuss now would only stir the rumor mill. At worst, you could be accused of defamation."

If the goal was to bring him down from his position, then they needed undeniable proof. Duke Gregory emphasized this calmly.

"I know..." Stewart had a bitter expression on his face.

Creating bad rumors about him isn't enough. I need to create an incident big enough for people to lose trust in him, something that can at least get him banished from the castle...

Unless he could get rid of the risk of Rio claiming he was falsely accused, Stewart wouldn't be able to sleep soundly at night.

"If possible, I'd like to obtain proof Alphonse was killed by him..."

Killing a foreign noble out of revenge was something that couldn't be overlooked.

"That's too difficult to be reasonable. He may have had a motive, but a corpse was never found, no?" Duke Gregory said.

Even if Rio had killed Alphonse, without a corpse, there was no way of proving it. Pursuing that route would require locating the corpse first.

"That's true..."

"In a way, Amakawa himself is the greatest evidence there is. If we can prove he is the same person, his past crimes will naturally come to light. Why don't we pursue the path of proving that Rio is the same person as Haruto Amakawa

instead?" Duke Gregory suggested.

The grim look on Stewart's face was probably because he knew that proving them to be the same person wasn't enough to establish Rio's guilt.

If Rio claimed he was innocent, an investigation could lead to the discovery of Stewart's lie. That was why he needed more material to drag Rio down in case that happened, so that no one would be able to trust Rio's statement.

"Is there something you're concerned about?"

"Ah, no. It's just that he's established considerable status for himself now, and those around him trust him a lot. Digging up the past at this point might not result in any significant punishment. Princess Flora herself seems to be close to him, and she has quite the naive personality, so I fear that might be taken into consideration..."

"Good point. But the sin of attempted murder against royalty is grave. Even if the Restoration shows leniency to him, the Galarc Kingdom will definitely punish him. I won't allow him to get away unpunished. Such unfit behavior from the Honorary Knight would be scandalous," Duke Gregory said. But in spite of his words...

And once he's fallen from grace, it might be amusing to offer him a hand back up and make him indebted to me.

Duke Gregory had no intention of completely ending Rio's life as a noble. This was because he acknowledged Rio's abilities. He believed that it was only appropriate for Rio to be valued for his long list of achievements, based on the results.

However, that didn't mean he was impressed by the current situation where Rio was the only one achieving all the success. That's why he was so eager to find material that could drag Rio down, and that was why he was trying to use Stewart to his advantage.

Unaware of that, Stewart rejoiced at the fact he had found a reliable ally. "Oh, how reassuring... I'm glad I consulted you."

"I'm glad you think that of me, but are you sure you won't consult your father about this?"

Duke Gregory didn't want anyone else to interfere with this incident, so he preferred if Duke Huguenot stayed out of it. But it could be problematic if he didn't at least confirm things first, so he asked for the sake of the future.

"Although I was a victim, the fact I hit Princess Flora when I was pushed angered my father a lot. He had to cover for me because of it too..."

I see. It sounds like his father was forced to use some questionable methods.

It's no surprise his father was angered by that. But this also means that if things go well, Duke Huguenot will be indebted to me too.

Duke Gregory took a guess at the situation and smiled.

"But if you expose Amakawa's sins, your father may change his mind about you."

He whispered the sweet words Stewart wanted to hear the most. Stewart's expression relaxed, pleased to hear those words too.

"I sure hope so," he mumbled.

"However, if this is the truth, he truly is a shameless man. The perpetrator appearing before the victim, innocently pretending to be someone else..."

"The man is conceited and desperate for validation. After all, he started as a lowly commoner from the slums. He probably couldn't get over his admiration for noble society."

"I see..."

Stewart spoke of Rio's character with great detest, but Duke Gregory only showed a half-hearted reaction to his description. This was because Duke Gregory had his own image of Rio, and it was notably different from Stewart's.

To him, Rio was a man of many mysteries, too calm for anyone to read his emotions or intentions, always eerily detached from the world. That was his image of Haruto Amakawa and also why Duke Gregory was wary of the questions surrounding Rio.

Well, if he truly is as he describes, then that would be interesting too.

Somewhat impressed, Duke Gregory smiled.

"Are you sure Princess Flora hasn't noticed his identity?" he asked.

"She didn't care about him in the slightest back then. They barely had any chance to interact. Even I didn't notice until yesterday."

Although they had attended the same academy, they lived in different worlds. Stewart sneered.

"Hmm..."

Duke Gregory didn't know how much Rio's appearance and impression had changed since back then, so he could only accept those words at face value. However, he had his apprehensions.

The fact that the possibility cannot be entirely dismissed is rather dangerous...

That being said, he didn't want Stewart to feel daunted by that possibility, so he purposefully chose not to point that out.

"Is there anyone else in the current Restoration who knew him before?" Duke

Gregory asked.

"From the academy, there's Queen Christina and Lady Roanna. And I think there was another female student who was in the same group."

"If there are other people who know of Amakawa's other identity, asking them to testify that he's the same person is one definite method of proof."

The more testimonies there were, the more trustworthy it would be.

"But Queen Christina is currently indebted to him. Princess Flora is smitten as well, and Roanna will always obey those two. If I asked them for help, they may crush our chance of exposing his sin in advance."

"Hmm. So we need someone we can silence if we're to seek assistance from others," Duke Gregory said. "Come to think of it, you said there was someone he was close to back then situated around him now. Who might that be?"

"Celia Claire. She was a professor at the academy back then."

"Oh, that woman. If I recall correctly, she currently lives at his mansion."

"Yes. I'm almost certain she's chosen to be with him despite his identity."

"I see."

If Haruto Amakawa was really Rio, that was a natural conclusion to make.

"Back then, he used his position as a student to take advantage of a kind teacher. Professor Celia is being deceived. She just doesn't know his true nature..." Stewart growled bitterly, having respected Celia as his own teacher.

"If she's staying silent despite knowing his past, that would count as assisting a criminal—an illegal matter that should be tried."

"Are you suggesting we threaten her?"

"She's a potential candidate. If the threat works, she'd be easy to manage as a witness," Duke Gregory said with a shallow smile.

"I think the other female student would be easier to silence than Queen Christina or Princess Flora. And she doesn't live with him, unlike Professor Celia..."

Unwilling to threaten the teacher he was indebted to, Stewart nominated Elise Brandt, the other student who had been on the scene, as a witness.

"Then we'll consider that person a candidate too. It's better to have more options whether we actually approach them for assistance or not. Is there anyone else from that time who knows of him?" Duke Gregory asked.

"He was isolated in the academy, and I don't think he knew anyone outside... But I can't be certain," Stewart said hesitantly, unsure of his answer.

"Then maybe we can consider the others close to him as candidates."

"What do you mean...?"

“For example, his little sister. A relative of his should naturally know about his past, no?”

“A little sister? As far as I know, the man named Rio didn’t have a sister...”

“Please don’t tell me you’ve got him mistaken for someone else at this point.”

Duke Gregory gave Stewart a dubious look, sending him into a fluster.

“O-Of course not! I’m pretty sure of it. There are just too many coincidences.”

How incompetent. We’re trying to prove whether those coincidences were inevitable or not.

They were trying to use those coincidences as the basis of their evidence, but in a way, that was nothing more than an assumption that abandoned all logical reasoning.

It was by no means easy to prove objective inevitability. Doing so could even require the use of dirty or high-handed methods. Duke Gregory looked down on Stewart harshly, wondering if he understood that.

“Well, it’s fine. Either way, in order to bring him down, we’ll need to make an attack eventually.”

In any case, it was Stewart who would handle the matter. All Duke Gregory had to do was encourage him to move for him.

“Right.”

“In fact, it might be better for you to just show up in front of him.”

“Why is that?”

“Wouldn’t you want to take another look at Amakawa’s face? You may find something new if you observe him with the knowledge of his other identity.”

“Good point...”

Now that he thought about it, Stewart had never paid close attention to Haruto Amakawa’s face before. Before censuring him, it would be best to confirm what he looked like at least once.

“The problem is how to get you near him. Princess Charlotte handles all the public relations of that mansion. It isn’t easy to get a meeting request granted.”

It wasn’t impossible to visit the mansion without an appointment, but if they weren’t friends with Rio, they would risk incurring Charlotte’s wrath.

There was significant meaning in the fact that a high-ranking royal was serving as the point of contact for a regular noble. They had built such a strong wall, even a duke like Gregory hesitated to visit unannounced without having a good reason.

“What do we do, then?”

“We have no choice but to wait for him to leave his mansion and make contact in some way. It will require monitoring movements at the mansion, but you can leave that to me.”

“Thank you.”

Since he left the mansion quite often, Rio was actually one of the residents who was easier to meet. It wouldn’t be that hard to track when he went out if Duke Gregory placed a few castle guards under his command nearby to watch the mansion.

“That aside, do you have a duty at the Restoration right now? I need you to be available to move as soon as he leaves the mansion.”

“I’m a knight of the Restoration right now, so I assist in the patrols of the castle. My assignment is the area around the guest house though...”

“In that case, I will arrange to have you transferred to the area around his mansion. I’ll also speak to the supervisor of that area to give you the freedom to move around. That way you’ll have an excuse to give your father, yes?”

“Y-Yes, I would appreciate that!”

With Duke Gregory’s cooperation, something that would have been difficult for Stewart to do without connections was easily made possible.

“Also, there’s one thing I’d like to ask of you...”

“What is it?”

“The Restoration’s uniform will stand out, so can you lend me Galarc’s uniform?” Stewart asked, looking down at his own uniform with a self-deprecating smirk.

Duke Gregory saw a glimpse of the inferiority complex Stewart had over his uniform and nodded with a knowing look.

“Very well. I will have that arranged,” he said.

“Thank you very much!”

Stewart thanked him happily for the umpteenth time that day.

Chapter 6: Brother and Sister

In the morning, Christina, Flora, Roanna, Hiroaki, Rei, and Kouta set out to leave Rio's mansion.

At the entrance of the mansion, Flora drew Latifa into her arms while sadly bidding goodbye. Latifa responded by hugging her back.

"It's so unfortunate I have to say goodbye to you, Suzune..."

"Don't be unreasonable, Flora," Christina said, gently sliding an arm around her sister's back.

"Let's have another sleepover soon! Maybe even tonight! Is that okay, Onii-chan?"

With a carefree smile, Latifa turned the conversation to Rio, who had been watching over things beside her.

"I'm sure they have their own plans to consider, Suzune," Rio said with a strained smile. He then turned to Christina and the others. "But feel free to visit again at your convenience."

"I wouldn't mind tonight..." Flora said restlessly. She must have had lots of fun staying up late talking to girls her age at the sleepover last night.

"Flora... Show some restraint," Christina said as though she was looking at a disobedient child.

"If too much time passes, you'll probably feel reserved again, so I'd prefer it if you came back right away. I want to spend more time with my sister! Ehe heh," Latifa said bashfully.

"Latifa... Me too. Let's spend more time together."

Overcome with emotion, Flora hugged Latifa even harder.

"Well, the food at Haruto's mansion was great, so I wouldn't mind coming again," Hiroaki said casually beside them.

"Me too. Please invite us again!" Rei immediately agreed with Hiroaki.

"You need to show *more* reserve," Roanna said with a sigh.

"Of course, Roanna will come again too, right?" Latifa asked, looking at Roanna. Flora joined her in staring at Roanna.

Roanna was taken aback by the sudden question, but she folded under the power of Latifa's and Flora's stares.

“I-I... If it isn’t a bother, then...” she said, nodding shyly.

“Yay! Let’s chat lots again tonight!”

“Yes!”

Latifa and Flora rejoiced together. Thus, with their next sleepover decided immediately, Christina and the others left the mansion.

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After seeing Christina and the others off, Rio was summoned by Latifa and Liselotte. He went to meet up with them in the parlor, accompanied by Miharu and Aki. There, he was informed of their plans to go out.

“You’re going to the Ricca Guild?”

“Yup. Liselotte wants to hear our opinions of her new product,” Latifa explained cheerfully.

“I see...” Rio looked over at Miharu and Aki.

Last night, Aki had casually agreed to help without thinking, but she hadn’t expected Rio to come along, so she now looked rather uncomfortable.

“And so, we wanted you to come along, Onii-chan,” Latifa said.

“I’m fine with it... Is it just the five of us?”

“Yup!”

“Are you sure?” Rio asked Liselotte as well.

“Of course. We’re the ones asking *you* to come. Princess Charlotte has given her permission already, so if you’re not busy, we’d like to leave right away.”

“I see...” Rio glanced at Aki’s face once more.

Could this be...

A look of realization crossed Rio’s face as he noticed how strangely gleeful Latifa was, grinning from where she sat before him.

“Sure, I can go now. But I’d like to talk a little before we leave,” he said with a nod, a look of resolution on his face.

Latifa tilted her head. “Talk?”

“Yes. I’d like to talk to Aki properly.” Rio’s gaze was clearly fixed on her.

“With...me?” Aki’s body shook as though she had been startled, and her expression stiffened.

“Yes. About the memories of Amakawa Haruto that I have. We weren’t able to talk about it during the banquet.”

In contrast, Rio’s voice was awkward but gentle, as though he had noticed her nerves and was trying to keep her calm.

“In that case, it would be best for us to leave,” Liselotte said, believing herself to be an outsider who should excuse herself before they started discussing the details. However...

“No, I’d like everyone here to listen as well. Since you four are the ones who knew Amakawa Haruto directly... Is that okay?”

“Okay.”

Liselotte nodded with a serious look. Miharu and Latifa also gave their silent agreement.

“Is that okay with you too, Aki?” Rio asked.

“I don’t mind...”

Aki averted her eyes from Rio and nodded, squeezing the hand of Miharu beside her.

And so, Rio began speaking. “As you all know, I have Amakawa Haruto’s memories. But as I said during the banquet, I consider myself a different person from him.”

Displeased with Rio’s words, Aki pursed her lips unhappily.

“Can you tell me what you’re thinking, Aki?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? You just said it yourself—you’re not Amakawa Haruto. Why should I have to tell someone who has nothing to do with me what I think of them?” Aki said scathingly.

“I don’t consider myself Amakawa Haruto. I can’t lie about how I feel regarding that. But I realized I shouldn’t be running from his memories either. I want to face the life that he lived, and the traces he left behind.”

“Even if you tell me that, there’s nothing I can do,” Aki said with a frown.

It was at that point that Miharu called out to her with a look of determination. “Surely you have an opinion about it, no?”

“Miharu...”

“I know you’ve had conflicted feelings about Haru-kun this entire time. I’ve been by your side watching you until now. Why don’t you tell him those feelings?” Miharu said in a scolding tone.

“But Haruto doesn’t think of me as his little sister, does he? He already said he’s not Amakawa Haruto. Why should I have to express my feelings to a stranger? Answer me that first,” Aki snapped, her discontent exploding.

“For my own satisfaction, I guess. I’m the one who wants to do this. I want to stop running away from you for my own sake. I don’t want to pretend I can’t see you anymore. If possible, I want to get along with you. I want to move forward together.”

“Get along...”

“Am I being unreasonable?”

Aki didn’t answer. She fell silent as though she was avoiding giving her reply.

“You heard him. Haruto said he wants to get along with you,” Miharu said in a rare show of proactiveness. Perhaps she thought it was her duty to mediate between them as Aki’s older sister figure—or perhaps she had her own opinion about the situation.

“What about you, Miharu? Are you okay with this? Didn’t you love him? You’re still in love with Amakawa Haruto right now, yet the person with his memories is saying he’s not him. What does that mean? Did you fall in love with someone who isn’t Amakawa Haruto?”

It was a clear attempt at diverting the topic, but there was no doubt that was another source of Aki’s discontent.

“Yes,” Miharu said in a clear voice.

Aki was wide-eyed with shock. Rio’s eyes also looked surprised.

“At the banquet, I realized I couldn’t think of Haruto and Haru-kun as different people. I told Haruto that I wanted to be with both of him.”

“So why...”

“I think I understand now—the reason Haruto feels like he’s a different person to Haru-kun. I was told I was Lina in my past life, and I consider myself a different person to her. That’s why I know what it’s like when people ask you to be someone you aren’t,” Miharu said with a bitter expression.

Miharu...

Rio’s eyes widened. He was being told he didn’t have to be Amakawa Haruto by no one other than Miharu herself. It was like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“What about you, Aki? How do you feel about Haruto having Haru-kun’s memories? I want to know too. So please, tell Haruto properly.”

Miharu looked at Rio as she urged Aki to talk about her feelings.

“I hate Amakawa Haruto,” Aki muttered, averting her gaze.

“Why is that?” Miharu asked gently.

“Because I had to watch mom suffer after the divorce... I don’t know why they divorced, and I know my hatred is misplaced. But I also know he wasn’t there when we needed him—he wasn’t there for *me* when *I* needed him...”

Aki was looking downward like a sulking child. Yet even then, she was able to voice her entire heart. Although it wasn’t to Haruto, she was telling her

feelings to Rio, who possessed his memories.

“You were lonely,” Miharu said, verbalizing Aki’s feelings.

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I still get mad when I think about it now... I just hate him.”

Aki pouted without looking at Rio.

“But that doesn’t mean I hate *him*. I’m grateful for what he’s done for us, and I feel bad for all the trouble we caused him during the banquet,” she added. “I think what he says is right. He isn’t Amakawa Haruto, and I agree with that. But...”

“But what?”

Miharu slowly urged Aki to keep talking.

“But hearing him say they are two different people was also irritating.”

Although she could understand, she couldn’t give a clear explanation. Aki vented her honest but complex feelings. Rio was about to respond with a serious expression, but...

“Why?”

Latifa, who had been listening silently until now, questioned Aki first.

“Huh?”

“Why were you irritated? What did you want Onii-chan to do for you?”

“I don’t know,” Aki snapped with a hint of self-derision.

“Did you want Onii-chan to be Amakawa Haruto?”

“No. I literally just said I hated him, and that I think of them as different people.”

“Then did you want him to think of you as his little sister even though he’s not Amakawa Haruto?”

“Wh-What? Where did that come from?” Aki said, turning red at Latifa’s question.

“That’s what I got from what you were saying.”

“No way. I’d never want that,” Aki denied vehemently. “Besides...”

She was about to say something but stopped.

“But what?”

“I don’t think I’m suited to being a little sister. It’s happened twice now. Two people who became my older brother chose to leave me. Probably because I’m annoying and dishonest?” Aki said, scorning herself sadly.

“That’s not true!” Miharu said immediately. “We may not be related by blood, but you’re my adorable little sister who I wouldn’t trade for the world.”

Aki smiled happily. “Thanks, Miharu.”

“What about you, Onii-chan?” Latifa asked Rio. “What do you think of Aki? What kind of relationship do you want with her?”

“What kind of relationship, huh? I...”

Rio thought carefully without giving an immediate answer. Everyone waited for his words without interrupting.

“I think you’re very important to me. It’s my wish to live happily with everyone, so I want you there too. That’s why I’d like us to join hands and live through both the tough times and fun times together,” Rio said, revealing his true thoughts.

“Onii-chan...” Latifa smiled happily and turned to Aki with a look of expectation. “What do you think, Aki?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

“Onii-chan is saying he can’t be happy without you, so he wants you here.”

“I-I don’t need you to spell it out for me!” Aki raised her voice in embarrassment.

“Do you hate being with him?”

“I don’t... I’m glad he includes me when he thinks of everyone. Though I do wonder if it’s okay for me to be accepted when I’m like this...”

“It’s fine. Of course it’s fine! Onii-chan is saying even if you whine and waver, we’ll carry those anxieties with you and overcome them together. Right?”

Latifa looked up at Rio.

“Yeah. So you can keep hating Amakawa Haruto if you want. You can vent those feelings at me without holding back.”

“Why?”

“It may be convenient for me to say I’m a different person, but it’s unfair of me to pretend I can’t see you suffering over him when you’re right next to me. The memories and emotions of Amakawa Haruto definitely exist within me. That’s why as the person who inherited his memories and feelings, I want to face you properly.”

Rio stared straight at Aki without any hesitation in his eyes.

“Isn’t it a nuisance for you to have to deal with these irrational feelings of mine?” Aki asked, averting her eyes timidly. Was she refraining from venting her feelings? Or was she feeling guilty or afraid?

“I don’t think you’re a nuisance,” Rio said to Aki gently.

“Why not?” Aki asked in disbelief, eyes wide.

“Like I said just now, Amakawa Haruto’s memories and feelings definitely

exist within me. That’s why I can’t think of you as a stranger, and don’t want to treat you as one. You might not like it if I said I considered you my little sister, but that’s how important you are to me. I guess that’s why?” Rio said, looking a little bashful.

Aki’s entire body flinched.

“Yeah. That’s why I want you to tell me if you’re feeling lost or want to whine, without holding anything back. Let’s worry over things together. That’s what I think, anyway...”

Rio was doing his best to express his emotions in his own clumsy way, when he suddenly stopped and looked surprised.

“Wah...” Aki had started crying, tears running down her face.

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“A-Aki? What’s wrong? Are you okay?!” Latifa asked in a panic.

“Y-Yeah. I don’t know why the tears won’t stop... S-Sorry.” Aki turned red all the way to her ears. She looked down and wiped her tears.

“Aki... It’s okay to cry,” Miharu said, hugging her lovingly.

Rio scratched his cheek awkwardly, wondering if he was the one who had made her cry. “Did I say something weird?”

“I don’t think so,” Liselotte denied gently, giggling beside Rio.

“Yup, as your little sister, I’m proud. You’re the best big brother!” Latifa agreed happily.

Then, several minutes later.

“Um, I’m sorry for suddenly crying...” Aki apologized embarrassedly, eyes still red.

“No, there’s no need to apologize... I’m the one sorry for saying something you hated to the point of crying.” Rio bowed his head at her in return.

“I-It’s not that I hated it...” Aki looked away from him while she fidgeted.

“Onii-chan, what Aki is saying is...”

“Wah! Stop, don’t say anything weird, Latifa!” Aki shouted, stopping Latifa from finishing what she was saying.

“Hee hee.”

Miharu and Liselotte laughed in amusement.

“But you know, I have a problem that I’d like Aki to answer properly too,” Latifa said to Aki with a slight pout.

“What?”

“Do you want Onii-chan to think of you as his little sister? And do you want him to be your Onii-chan?”

Aki reddened. “What? That again?”

“Yes, again. Because if you become his little sister, that makes you *my* sister. I’d be so happy if that happens,” Latifa said with a bright smile.

“Huh? Me and you?”

“Yup! That’s how it works. Even though the three of us aren’t related by blood.”

“I see...”

Aki blinked. She hadn’t considered that possibility.

“That’s why I want to hear your feelings about it. What do you think of Onii-chan?”

“I-I don’t care...” Aki mumbled inarticulately.

“What about you, Onii-chan? Since you’re the person with Amakawa

Haruto's memories, I want to hear how you feel about Aki."

"That depends on how Aki feels..." Rio shrank back at the direct question from Latifa.

"I think Aki will be able to be honest if you just tell her you want her to be your little sister."

"E-Enough, Latifa! I'm already being honest!" Aki yelled in a fluster.

"Fine. What did you call Amakawa Haruto when you were young, Aki?"

"I-I called him Onii-chan..."

"Then can you still call this person here that?"

"You mean this Haruto? No way, I'd never!" Aki said, shaking her head in a flurry.

"What about 'brother'?"

"Wh-What? What are you even going on about?!"

"About what you could call Onii-chan."

"What do you mean... I *said* I don't want Haruto to be my big brother!" Aki yelled, face red.

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After that, Rio and the others boarded a horse carriage and left the castle. Their destination was the branch of the Ricca Guild located in the capital.

As guests of President Liselotte, the group was given VIP treatment by the store attendants. That being said, they weren't there to spend money today. They were first led to the office to assist with the development of the new products. A wide range of women's clothing being designed by the Ricca Guild lined the large table in the room.

"Hmm. I think this one needs more volume in the frills."

"I really like the tiered tulle skirt. It's so cute."

"I think this one is cuter."

Latifa, Miharu, and Aki all gave their opinions here and there. Rio and Liselotte sat on some chairs a slight distance away, watching over the three of them.

"Thank you for today, Liselotte," Rio suddenly said to Liselotte beside him.

"For what?" Liselotte tilted her head like she had no idea what she had to be thanked for.

"I'm guessing what happened today was because Latifa came to you, right? So that I could talk to Aki."

Liselotte's eyes widened slightly before she smiled somewhat shyly. "You saw through me. But there's no need to thank me for it. I *did* want to gather opinions about the new product line in development."

"Thanks to you, I was able to have a proper talk with Aki."

"Not at all. Even if I hadn't done anything, you would have approached Aki yourself. I have nothing to take credit for."

"No, I was able to gather the courage thanks to you setting the table for me. If you hadn't done so, I would have taken much longer to do it."

"I think you were very cool, just like an older brother should be." Liselotte praised Rio with a giggle.

"Aha ha. I'd like to buy you something as thanks... But now that I think about it, this store is yours. You can get anything you want here."

"In that case, please buy something for Latifa instead. She was really worried about you and Aki."

The gaze Liselotte watched Latifa with was filled with affection. But after hearing that, Rio decided he had to thank Liselotte properly even more.

"All right," he said with a peaceful nod, grinning broadly.

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Meanwhile, at the Galarc Castle, Stewart was rushing to Duke Gregory's office in a fluster.

"Enter."

"Excuse me." Stewart entered the room, panting, with a tense look on his face.

"Take a deep breath first. Those clothes look good on you, by the way." Duke Gregory paused with his pen in his hand and welcomed him calmly.

"Th-Thank you very much..."

Stewart looked down at his uniform and thanked him with a pleased look. His badge was that of the Restoration's but the knight uniform he was currently wearing had been loaned to him through Duke Gregory's connections. At a distance, it was easy to mistake him for one of the Galarc Kingdom's knights.

"So, I'm assuming there was movement regarding what we discussed before?"

"Yes. He's left the mansion."

"Oh? And is he on his way to the castle?"

"No, he boarded a horse carriage headed for outside the castle."

“How interesting...”

“Excluding attendants, another four residents of the mansion boarded the carriage with him. I assume they’re either going shopping or to meet up with someone.”

“I see. In that case, this is our chance. If it’s outside of the castle, we can run into him without guilt. Now, shall we go scout things out and give our greetings?”

Duke Gregory’s eyes glinted ominously at the chance that had fallen on their laps right away.

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Two hours later...

“The Ricca Guild’s pasta was delicious!”

The group had finished eating lunch at the Ricca Guild’s restaurant. But before they returned to the office to resume their assistance with product development...

“I’d like to do some shopping,” Rio said.

“What are you buying?” Latifa asked, tilting her head.

“That’s up to the four of you to decide. It’ll be a gift of gratitude.”

“Of gratitude? For who?”

“For Latifa and Liselotte, who planned all of this. And for Aki and Miharu too.” Rio shrugged lightly to hide his embarrassment.

“You say that, but...”

“Me too?”

Aki and Miharu were bewildered, as they thought they had no reason to accept a gift.

“I said I was fine without one...” Liselotte said reservedly.

“I’m in the mood to give gifts to you all. Please accept it. If you don’t think you have a reason to do so, then think of it as a show of appreciation for always thinking of me,” Rio said bashfully.

Latifa looked up at him hesitantly. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you for acting as the bridge between us.” Rio gently patted her head.

“Tee hee. Then I want clothes! Something I can wear whenever. Oh, but won’t the others get jealous if we’re the only ones who get gifts?” Latifa asked, worrying about the others waiting back at the mansion.

“In that case, we can always come back with the others another day. Maybe even tomorrow or the day after,” Rio said.

“Okay!”

That’s right. It didn’t have to be today. The fun days would continue tomorrow, the day after, and further into the future. Latifa nodded happily.

“I’ll lead you to the section for women’s clothing then,” Liselotte said with a warm smile.

Thus, Rio and the girls moved to the women’s clothing section of the Ricca Guild. While Liselotte showed Miharu and Aki around and chose clothes with them, Rio kept Latifa company in her clothing selection.

“Say, what do you think of this one?”

“It’s cute.”

“What about this one?”

“That’s cute too.”

“And this?”

“Cute.”

The other three had tactfully created alone time for the two siblings. Latifa stood in front of a mirror, bringing various outfits up to her body while seeking Rio’s opinion.

“Onii-chan, that’s the only thing you’ve been saying. Do you really think they’re cute?” she asked with an unimpressed glare.

“It’s what I truly think. You’re cute no matter what you wear,” Rio said with a slightly guilty grin.

“I see. I guess I can forgive you.”

Latifa gave an unnaturally arrogant reply to hide her embarrassment.

“But still, I want to wear the one Onii-chan thinks is the cutest,” she added pleadingly.

Rio scratched his cheek awkwardly. “I’m not very good at choosing clothes. Especially when it comes to women’s clothing.”

“But it’s a thank-you present for me, right? That’s why I want you to choose.”

“I see. That makes sense. I’ll do my best then.”

After that, Rio started taking clothes into his own hands and seriously considered what suited Latifa the best. The sight of the two siblings chatting harmoniously brought smiles to the faces of the store attendants and passing customers. However...

“If it isn’t Amakawa.”

The alone time between the siblings was suddenly interrupted by the arrival of an outsider. It was Duke Gregory.

"Good day, Duke Gregory. It's been a while. And..."

He was a duke, so Rio greeted him politely, despite the strong sense of wariness he felt on the inside. But what was more troubling was the man beside him.

"Stewart Huguenot. Long time no see."

It was a confident, high-handed voice. He was staring at Rio with unnatural intensity, to the point of rudeness. Although he was the eldest son of a duke, a disinherited child had no business taking that tone against an Honorary Knight.

"Long time no see." Rio immediately moved forward and hid Latifa behind himself.

"Yes, it's truly been a long time."

Fortunately, Stewart paid no attention to her, as he was busy staring hard at Rio.

He really does seem similar. When I look for the resemblance, I can definitely see it.

Whether it was hostility or scorn, either way, there was a blatant negative emotion in his eyes. Stewart had already tried to mess with Rio in the past at Amande, and Duke Gregory was also someone who tended to pick fights with Rio.

What's going on? What are they trying to do?

Rio immediately sensed something was odd, increasing his wariness further.

"What a coincidence meeting you here," Duke Gregory said.

"Yes, a coincidence."

Rio immediately thought he was lying. There was no way this was a coincidence. It was also strange for two men to come to the women's clothing section of the store—not impossible, but he couldn't see *these* two coming here to shop.

"Are you here shopping with your sister?" Duke Gregory asked, gaze going to Latifa hidden behind Rio's back. His words also directed Stewart's attention to her. Rio was standing in a way that obscured their vision, but...

"Does your sister have no manners at all? Ignoring a noble of higher ranking without so much as a greeting," Duke Gregory scoffed.

Rio glanced over his shoulder behind him.

Latifa's face was pale, and she was understandably trembling like she was afraid.

This isn't good...

Rio opened his mouth to wrap up the conversation as quickly as possible.

"Hey, stop being rude to Duke Gregory. At least show your face!"

But Stewart angrily walked around to the other side of Rio to look at Latifa's face. At his sudden appearance before her and the sound of his voice, Latifa was clearly frightened.

"Eek!"

"Hey, Latifa! Show me your face."

"What am I to you?"

"Your dearest big brother, right?"

The trauma of her days as a slave that had been sealed deep in her heart came flashing back.

"N-No! Don't come near me!" Latifa crouched on the ground, protecting her head with her hands.

"Huh?" Stewart was taken aback.

"Excuse me! What are you doing over there?"

Just then, Liselotte noticed the abnormality and came running over.

"Y-You've got it wrong. I haven't done anything! She just started acting out all of a sudden!"

Stewart pointed at Latifa, who was cowering on the floor, and asserted his innocence.

"No! No! Nooo!" Still cowering, Latifa trembled from head to toe.

Rio had a sour expression on his face. He had realized that the trauma hidden behind Latifa's smile was more serious than he thought.

What's with this girl? And where have I seen her before...?

Stewart was feeling an indescribable feeling of déjà vu. Didn't he know a little girl that feared him like this? The moment Stewart had that thought, a certain girl came to mind.

"*Eek! D-Don't come any closer!"*

"S-Stop— Stop hitting me! Please!"

"Y-You're my big brother."

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Forgive me, please!"

Back when Stewart was attending the Royal Academy, there had been a rare werebeast slave kept beneath the Huguenot estate in the capital. Stewart didn't know if his father had been doing anything to the girl, but he had often visited her for his own amusement. Whenever something unpleasant happened at the academy, he would dote on her to release his stress. That little girl had been his

toy.

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The girl on the floor before him had none of the traits of a werebeast. But for some reason, he was sure it was her—you could even call it an instinctual sense. Yet at the same time, he was confused. Why would she be here? How did she end up becoming this man's little sister? It made no sense at all.

But the greatest emotion Stewart was feeling was excitement. An intense feeling mixed with joy and anger overwrote any other feeling he could have. Stewart swallowed his breath and opened his parched mouth.

"Hey, don't tell me... Are you Latifa?"

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Roughly half an hour later, Duke Huguenot visited Christina's office in the guest house of the Galarc Kingdom.

"May I have a moment of your time? There's something I wish to discuss in private. If you could please clear the room."

Vanessa was in the room with them, but Duke Huguenot bowed his head and requested her dismissal from the room.

"Very well. Vanessa, you wait outside the room. Do not let anyone through until we're done," Christina ordered. She presumed there was something important to discuss.

"Understood." Vanessa bowed respectfully and left the room, leaving the two of them alone.

"Now, what did you want to discuss?"

"I agonized over this all night. Sir Amakawa is at the root of the matter, but please allow me to confess my own sins first."

"Your sins? That sounds ominous," Christina said, observing Duke Huguenot's expression.

"I'm afraid it's a fairly grave matter. If I said it has to do with the outdoor drill that was held around five years ago, I think you would understand, no?"

Christina's face turned grim. Just then, someone knocked on the door in a panicked manner.

"My deepest apologies for the interruption. I'm coming in."

Vanessa entered the room.

"What is it?"

Entering despite the clear orders not to let anyone in meant something unavoidable had occurred. And sure enough...

"King Francois has summoned both of you. An incident has occurred, and he

needs both of you present immediately," Vaneesa reported with a panicked look.

Chapter 7: Where Fiction Lies

A short time before Christina and Duke Huguenot were summoned by Francois, Rio and the others had left the Ricca Guild and boarded a carriage back to the castle. Stewart and Duke Gregory were also heading from the Ricca Guild back to the castle on their own carriage at the same time.

As soon as they reached the castle, both parties immediately went to King Francois's office, as there was no other way of settling the situation that had gotten out of hand.

"Why are you here?!"

"What's the meaning of this?"

"This slave belongs to our family!"

Rio tried to feign ignorance of Latifa's identity, but Stewart refused to accept that. He had been so agitated, nothing Rio said could reach him.

Since the situation couldn't be resolved by both parties discussing things themselves, Liselotte suggested they return to the castle and have King Francois make an impartial decision.

Duke Gregory agreed with Liselotte's suggestion. The original plan had been for Stewart to check Rio's face, so why was Stewart making such a fuss about this? He wanted to use their travel time in the carriage to get the details from Stewart.

Francois, who had been doing paperwork in his office, invited them inside after hearing there had been an incident. Thus, everyone was gathered once again in King Francois's office.

Currently inside the room were Francois, Rio, Latifa, Liselotte, Miharu, and Aki, as well as Duke Gregory and Stewart. Rio and Liselotte sat beside each other on the sofa, while Stewart and Duke Gregory were seated similarly across from them. King Francois was positioned between them, creating a U-shape seating formation.

As for Latifa, she was seated on a chair placed behind the sofa Rio and Liselotte were sitting on, with Miharu and Aki seated on each side of her.

"What on earth happened?" Francois asked, immediately requesting an explanation once everyone was seated.

“We were in the middle of shopping at the Ricca Guild when Duke Gregory and Duke Huguenot’s son approached Sir Haruto,” Liselotte said, acting as Rio’s witness.

She too had asked him about the circumstances on the carriage ride over, after which she had deemed Rio and Latifa innocent and decided to protect them. In a rare show of anger, Liselotte’s tone of speech towards Stewart and Duke Gregory was notably harsher than usual.

“Then, Lord Stewart suddenly started claiming that Lady Suzune was a slave of the Huguenot family. He seemed too enraged to discuss things properly on the spot, so I suggested we bring this case to Your Majesty for arbitration.”

Once Liselotte finished giving her summary, she glared at Stewart sharply in objection. Stewart looked daunted for a brief moment, but soon retorted in anger.

“O-Of course I’d be enraged. A slave from our family was freed without our permission!”

Unexpected as it was, now that he had a chance to censure Rio, he couldn’t back down anymore.

“I have never seen a werebeast before, but I have heard that they all have animal ears and tails. I do not see such traits in Haruto’s sister Suzune. Do you have any proof of your claims that she belongs to the Huguenot family?” Francois asked, glancing at Latifa as he addressed Stewart.

“The fact that the girl is terrified of me should be more than enough proof. She illegally escaped her slave status and is now trembling at the thought of the consequences,” Stewart said smugly.

While it sounded like good reasoning at first, that was no more than his own subjective view. He hadn’t provided any objective evidence to his claim. Stewart seemed to think that was enough to win the argument, but this wasn’t just a verbal quarrel. There was no way an accusation with no evidence could convince Francois.

“I’m sure you know already, but Haruto is a noble of our kingdom. Defaming his sister’s honor is equal to defaming Haruto’s. I will ask once more. Do you have adequate evidence to back up your claim? Are you aware you are already defaming Haruto and his sister at this very moment?”

Will you be prepared to face the consequences if we discover that you’re lying? That was what Francois was asking implicitly.

“A-Are you accusing me of lying?” Stewart recoiled with an offended look.

“I’m saying the truth cannot be confirmed without proof.”

“If you need proof, then I’m a witness!”

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“But Suzune has no traits of a werebeast. You said your slave was a werebeast.”

“I-I know she has no traits of a werebeast, but all her other features are identical. Enough to conclude she’s the same person.”

“Even so, as far as I’m concerned, that’s just your mistaken assumption.”

“In that case, please confirm it with Amakawa himself, Your Majesty. Ask him if Suzune over there was actually a slave of the Huguenot family before,” Stewart said insistently.

His encounter with Latifa had created an unexpected commotion, but it was too late to turn back now. There was nothing he could do but push on forward.

Hmph! Let’s see if you can lie to the king through your teeth. The moment you do, your sins will become that much graver. Once the king has lost trust in you, I’ll expose your past. It’s a two-pronged approach.

Besides, Stewart was certain of his success. He believed Latifa to be a weakness he could use to bring about Rio’s downfall.

“If this is the truth, our kingdom cannot turn a blind eye to the situation. I advise you not to brush this off without consideration, Your Majesty,” Duke Gregory said, speaking up for the first time to support Stewart.

“Very well,” Francois said with a sigh. “What is the truth, Haruto?”

“May I say something before I answer the question?” Rio said slowly.

“Go ahead.”

“If this situation grows out of hand, the Restoration may be notably affected. However, I do not wish for that to happen. Of course, I have every intention of explaining the full truth to Your Majesty, but could you please resolve the situation with that alone?”

“You mean you want Stewart and Clement to leave the room?”

“Yes,” Rio said, nodding.

“Wh-What are you saying?! Don’t be ridiculous! This is a conflict regarding *my* family’s slave, what gives you the right to make such absurd demands?!”

Stewart flew into a rage. He had been expecting Rio to lie and dodge the question, yet now Stewart was the one being openly excluded instead.

“If you back down here, the situation can at least be resolved without affecting the Restoration. That is what I’m saying,” Rio said to Stewart coldly. While he appeared to be extremely calm, there was a horribly angry look in his eyes. It seemed he was putting on a rational front despite his bottomless rage towards Stewart.

“Grr...!”

That isn't for you to decide, Stewart thought, but he swallowed those words at the pressure from Rio's gaze.

"Perhaps it would be best to just come out and say it, Stewart. I can explain things to His Majesty if you need," Duke Gregory interrupted.

Stewart took a deep breath to calm himself, then nodded. "Yes, so it seems. Can you please?"

"What do you mean by that, Clement?" Francois's dubious gaze turned to Duke Gregory.

"It has to do with the reason we appeared before Amakawa in the first place, Your Majesty. During the attack on the castle yesterday, someone called Amakawa by the name Rio. When I mentioned that to Stewart in passing, he said it was a name he was familiar with."

Duke Gregory observed Rio's reaction as he gave his explanation. Stewart took the chance to sneer at Rio triumphantly.

Sora, huh?

Rio immediately realized the cause, but he didn't think it was Sora's fault at all. He had told her to call him what she wanted, since everyone's memories would be reset through the transcendent rules anyway. But even if that hadn't been the case, he wouldn't blame her for paying attention to other things during the middle of a battle.

"When I questioned him for the details, he explained that Rio was the name of a felon in the Beltrum Kingdom. He attempted to kill Princess Flora and disappeared to avoid trial."

Rio maintained an unreadable expression throughout Duke Gregory's explanation.

"Amakawa's past is unclear enough as is," Duke Gregory continued. "If the Honorary Knight is actually a wanted criminal hiding his identity, this is a matter our kingdom cannot overlook. However, there is no proof that this Rio is the same person as Amakawa. That is why I asked Stewart to investigate the matter further."

"There's no mistaking it anymore. Amakawa is the same Rio that fled our kingdom to avoid his sins. Now that I think about it, our slave vanished shortly after he disappeared too. His former teacher, Professor Celia, is now living with him in his mansion. That should be more than enough evidence that he's Rio."

Stewart stood up from the sofa and pointed at Rio while giving his long-awaited accusation. Rio, however, remained silent without any emotion on his face.

Hmph. Not even a rebuttal, huh?

Stewart smiled in satisfaction, thinking Rio was panicking.

"If you don't think I suffice as a witness, then there are others that knew him back then. Queen Christina, Princess Flora, Duke Fontaine's daughter Roanna, and Count Brandt's daughter Elise were all there. You can ask Professor Celia too. In fact, you can call them all here and make them testify whether Amakawa is the same person as that sinner or not. How about it?" Stewart suggested, talking away eloquently. He only mentioned the facts that were convenient to himself and connected his points with fiction strewn about, making himself seem better.

Rio closed his eyes, a rare frown on his face. He was thinking.

Why was Stewart pulling a stunt like this? Why was he so good at irritating others? Even if he didn't know that Duke Huguenot had raised Latifa as an assassin, why didn't he question why she had remained with Rio all this time? As someone with a reasonable sense of mind and listening ability, Rio paid attention to Stewart's words.

But no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn't understand Stewart's point. Was it because he was only thinking of himself? Could he only perceive the truth when it was convenient for him? Did he even consider what kind of effect this situation would have on the Restoration if his claim was dismissed?

If not, he could only be called a fool. No, it would be better if he was only a fool. If he was doing this maliciously, then there was no way of defending him.

"Onii-chan..." Latifa mumbled anxiously behind him. At that, Rio made his decision.

"It's okay," he said, turning around to smile at her gently.

Enough.

Stewart could do what he wanted.

If he wanted to charge towards his own ruin without considering the effect he'd have on those around him, why should Rio stop that?

If what he wanted was downfall, then he could fall as far as he wanted by himself.

Rio's composure had reached its limit. He could have endured it if he was the only one being targeted, but his fuse was extremely short when Latifa was involved.

Stewart Huguenot had foolishly angered Rio. He had incurred the wrath of the man reincarnated from the Dragon King.

With Stewart being this foolish, there was no way to resolve the matter

without involving the Restoration. In this situation, the punishment could no longer apply to Stewart alone.

“What shall we do, Haruto? Do you mind if those he named are summoned here?” Francois asked, deferring to Rio with a sigh.

“Do as you please.”

And so, Rio stopped thinking about how others would be affected.

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Fifteen minutes later...

The first to arrive in Francois’s office was Celia from the mansion. She was accompanied by Charlotte, who had sensed something had happened, and Gouki as her guard.

Shortly after her, Christina, Flora, Roanna, Elise, and Duke Huguenot arrived. Vanessa accompanied them as their guard.

The moment Duke Huguenot entered the room, his expression froze over.

There was so much information to process, his brain couldn’t handle it. Why was Stewart sitting across from Rio? Why was Duke Gregory sitting beside him? And why was Stewart wearing the knight uniform of the Galarc Kingdom?

“My deepest apologies, Sir Amakawa.”

Christina had also stiffened, but she must have realized the situation wasn’t good. Even though she didn’t have a clue what happened, she bowed her head at Rio and apologized in a fluster.

The heir of a kingdom—one who had declared their accession to the throne and was acting queen, no less—had lowered their head to the noble of another kingdom before even hearing an explanation. It was an impossible sight.

“I should apologize too,” Rio replied, standing up and returning her apology with a frown.

Stewart immediately stood up as well and yelled, “H-Hold on a minute! Why are you apologizing to him?!”

“Shut your mouth!” Duke Huguenot snapped.

Stewart flinched, but he still tried to explain himself. “F-Father, I...”

“I told you to shut your mouth. Why are you sitting there? What is that uniform? What mess have you gone and created?”

Duke Huguenot marched forward with the intent of grabbing Stewart in anger.

“Wait. Let me explain the situation first. You may speak afterward,” Francois

said, stopping him.

Duke Huguenot barely managed to stop himself. He silently glared at Stewart with a look that could kill.

“Clement and Stewart, vacate your seats. Queen Christina and Princess Flora will take your places. Huguenot, you may sit as well. Charlotte, you take your seat beside Haruto. The others shall remain standing,” Francois ordered. Everyone moved to their assigned position. Rio was sandwiched between Liselotte and Charlotte, while Flora, Christina, and Duke Huguenot sat across from them.

“Now, Liselotte. Give a summary of the situation and issue at hand.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Liselotte nodded respectfully and began her logical summary of the events.

“...and so, that is why you have all been called here as witnesses. At present, there are two points of issue to be resolved: first, whether Sir Haruto is the same person as the Rio who once attended Beltrum’s Royal Academy, and second, whether Lady Suzune is the same werebeast slave that belonged to the Huguenot family.”

She concluded her explanation with a succinct list of the matters to be addressed. The reactions from the members of the Restoration were all varied.

Christina was staring at Rio apologetically with a look of complete resignation. Flora had every intention of defending Rio, so she had a rare look of sullenness on her face. Meanwhile, Roanna didn’t appear particularly surprised. She may have had a faint inkling that Haruto was Rio already. Either way, she appeared to have conflicted feelings about something, as there was a bitter look on her face.

In contrast, there was someone whose eyes were darting about the place in shock. It was Elise Brandt. Her former classmate—one who had been bullied for being an orphan—had achieved astounding success in a foreign kingdom and was now in a position far superior to hers, making her shock even greater. The color drained from her face.

However, there was someone who had been backed into a corner more than anyone else.

This idiot...!

Duke Huguenot. He had just decided to accept his sin and confess to Christina when this had happened. He had even planned on making an official apology to Rio, but now everything was ruined because of Stewart. For some reason, Latifa, whom he had sent out as an assassin, was here as well. This must

be what it meant to be struck by a bolt from the blue.

Did this idiotic son of his have something against him? Duke Huguenot turned to glare daggers at Stewart behind him. Stewart let out a squeak of fear.

But this wasn't the time to be distracted by that fool. Duke Huguenot opened his mouth to apologize to Rio, when...

"First, let's hear the statements from both parties," Francois said first.

"I-In that case, please allow me to give my statement first!"

Stewart hurriedly requested the chance to explain himself first. The father he feared had arrived, and the air in the room was different to what he had expected.

"W-Wait a moment! Instead of having this fool talk, allow me to explain things!" Duke Huguenot interrupted in a hurry. However...

"Why not? Let the fool speak," Charlotte interrupted with a cheerful smile.

"Wha..." Stewart was flabbergasted by being so openly called a fool.

"If you miss this chance, you'll never be able to speak again, no? I think it's fine to give you the time to make one last struggle in vain—as a parting gift to the afterlife."

Even though no verdict had been given yet, Charlotte's words assumed Stewart's defeat.

"What do you have to say, Stewart?" Francois said with a sigh, urging Stewart to give his statement.

"This person is the criminal who once shoved me into Princess Flora, sending her off a cliff! On top of that, he stole our family's slave and keeps her with him now! These are all reasons for due punishment, are they not?!"

Unable to understand why he was the one being backed into a corner, Stewart pointed a finger at Rio and ranted in a fluster.

"If what you say is the truth, that is," Francois said.

"It's the truth!"

"Then let's hear Haruto's statement."

Francois looked at Rio calmly.

"First, the fact I once attended Beltrum's Royal Academy is the truth. Rio is my other name, and my little sister's name is indeed Latifa. Out of fear of a situation such as this, we used fake names for ourselves."

Even without testimony from his former schoolmates, Rio readily revealed his own background. Hearing him acknowledge it himself had Roanna and Elise swallowing their breaths.

"My hair color changed, and this is now my natural color. But previously, I

had black hair. I'm sure those of you who were in the same class as me would know this. Latifa's werebeast traits are being hidden by a magic artifact."

"S-See? I was right!"

Stewart had also swallowed his breath, but the next moment, he was cheering with joy. However, seeing how easily Rio had admitted his background made him feel suspicious at the same time. He started to wonder if this really was a favorable turn of events for him.

"However, I have objections to everything else. First, I have no recollection of pushing Princess Flora off a cliff, and I believe I had an adequate reason to release Latifa from slavery," Rio said, appealing his innocence.

"L-Liar! This man is lying!" Stewart immediately wailed.

"It's true that the only means we have of proving this is human memory," Francois said.

"That's right! That's why there's no way of proving his innocence! I was the one who was shoved first, so I know. There were other male students who witnessed the whole thing and testified. That was why he was deemed guilty. You can't overturn that ruling now!"

Just prove it if you can, Stewart said through his gloating smirk.

"No, Sir Amakawa is innocent," Christina objected.

"Yes. Sir Haruto... No, Sir Rio never pushed me!" Flora chimed in immediately.

"H-Hah?! What are you...?" Stewart stared at the two princesses in astonishment. "Princess Christina, back then you said you didn't see who it was that shoved me! Princess Flora, you also said you didn't know who did it!" he said to the two of them in confusion.

"Indeed, I didn't see who did it. But I'm saying I believe Sir Amakawa over you."

"I also believe Sir Rio!"

Christina and Flora both supported Rio unanimously.

"Th-That's ridiculous! That doesn't even count as a witness testimony!"

Stewart expressed his anger at the purely emotional argument.

"No, there was a witness."

However, Duke Huguenot interrupted him with a look of resignation.

"What do you mean?" Francois asked dubiously.

"I also had suspicions about Sir Amakawa's background after yesterday. When I investigated the incident once more, I discovered there was someone who gave an account that differed from the truth they witnessed."

“What...?”

“Elise, please describe what you witnessed back then with full honesty.”

Ignoring Stewart’s spluttering, Duke Huguenot requested Elise Brandt’s testimony.

Everyone in the room focused on Elise.

“Huh? Um...”

Elise was extremely flustered by being addressed so suddenly, but she didn’t have the nerve to refuse to give testimony under such conditions.

“I-It wasn’t Sir Amakawa who shoved Stewart aside,” she confessed.

“Then who did?” Francois asked.

“It was the male student who tried to pin the blame on Sir Amakawa alongside Stewart. We had just been attacked by monsters, so everyone was panicking. Stewart was injured in the commotion and sought help from the male student by grabbing at him... But when he was thrust aside for being in the way, he collided with Princess Flora. All Sir Amakawa did was save Princess Flora and fell off the cliff in her place...”

“Why did you stay silent about this?” Roanna, who was standing beside her, asked, aghast.

“I-I’m so sorry! I couldn’t defy Stewart back then, and the male student who was actually the culprit agreed with him, so I couldn’t speak up!” Elise bowed her head, face pale in terror.

“You’re lying! It’s a lie! That’s absurd!” Stewart yelled. His face was also as white as a sheet.

“In short, the one who should have been punished was the male student who actually did the pushing, and Stewart, who lied to shift the blame,” Francois concluded, slowly turning to Stewart.

“Vanessa, arrest the criminal,” Christina said, ordering Stewart’s capture.

“Understood.”

“Wha?!”

Vanessa pinned Stewart down from behind as she gave her reply. She then placed her entire weight on him, crushing him as he lay face-down. “Allow me to assist,” Gouki said, immediately approaching to help hold Stewart down. He had no mercy for the man that had wronged his master; he secured his arms behind his back and twisted his wrists.

“O-Ow! That hurts! Gah!” Stewart screamed in pain. “Y-You must be kidding me! Why am I being treated like this? Do you know who I am?! I’m the son of the Huguenot family!”

He ranted and raved, raising all hell. This prompted Duke Huguenot to get out of his seat and walk over to where Stewart was being held down on the floor.

“As of this moment, I declare your disownment,” he said.

Disownment—in other words, completely cutting off their relation as parent and child. It was a heavier punishment than disinheritance, which only took away the inheritance of court rank.

“D-Disownment?!” Stewart yelped, losing his composure in shock. “Y-You’re joking right? Don’t say that, father! Father?!”

“I wish you had never been born,” Duke Huguenot spat in disgust, glaring down at him.

“Wha...”

The blood drained from Stewart’s face. It would be the end of the line for him; he could not afford to be stricken like this.

“Wh-What kind of parent are you? How could you believe the words of that woman over your own son?!” he objected, appealing for sympathy.

“I-I am not telling any lies!” Elise screamed in a panic.

“You! You dare speak over me with your lower status?!” In his restrained position, Stewart glared at Elise for interjecting.

“Eek!” Elise instinctively backed away.

“Have you all forgotten?! That man stole a slave belonging to the Huguenot family and freed her! Do you even intend on addressing that?!” No longer caring for his appearance, Stewart evaded the question at hand by attempting to bring Rio down.

At that moment, Duke Huguenot raised his foot in a rage. He looked like he was about to stomp down on Stewart’s face—but changed his mind and slowly brought his foot back to the ground. Then, he turned to face Rio.

“Haruto—no, Sir Amakawa... Please accept my sincerest apologies!” Duke Huguenot got on his hands and knees before Rio, bowing with his forehead pressed against the floor.

“Wha...?”

Stewart was rendered speechless. He couldn’t believe he was seeing his father prostrate himself before someone, nor could he understand what reason he had to do so.

“I will make no excuses for the reason that girl is with you. I accept all the blame to be placed on me,” Duke Huguenot said, apologizing to Rio with his head still pressed on the floor.

“Hold on a minute. What’s the meaning of this?” Christina asked with a

dubious look. She had heard about the situation at the outdoor drill from Rio himself, but she didn't know that Latifa was an assassin that had been sent after Rio.

"I will explain what happened. Duke Huguenot, please raise your head," Rio said with a sigh.

"No, I do not deserve to do so."

"Then I will refuse to speak."

Despite Rio's words, Duke Huguenot kept his head pressed against the floor, until...

"Raise your head, Huguenot."

At Francois's order, he finally stood up. Rio began speaking.

"Immediately after the events of the outdoor drill, I learned that the crime was to be pinned on me, so I bid farewell to Celia and fled the Beltrum Kingdom. My destination was the Yagumo region, where my parents were born, but I was attacked by an assassin around Amande. That assassin was Latifa."

Christina and the others froze with startled expressions. Since Stewart had already admitted that Latifa was a slave of the Huguenot family, it was clear whose orders it had been.

"I fended her off and restrained her, but she was wearing a Collar of Submission and couldn't defy her master's orders. That's why I removed her collar and freed her from slavery."

"Then how did she end up as your sister?" Charlotte asked curiously.

"Back then, Latifa was no more than a nine-year-old child. As a werebeast, she had better physical abilities than a trained knight, but there was nowhere in the Strahl region for a werebeast child to settle permanently. So I took her with me on my journey, and we developed a brother-sister bond on the way."

"What a lovely story. As expected of Sir Haruto." Charlotte praised him with a cheerful grin. "In that case, what Sir Haruto did was justified self-defense. He has nothing to be blamed for in releasing Lady Latifa from slavery," she added in support of Rio and Latifa.

"Huguenot, was it you who ordered the assassination?" Francois asked.

"Yes, that is the truth."

"Do you have anything to say to defend yourself?"

"I do not."

Duke Huguenot gracefully admitted his crime without making excuses. It wasn't because he didn't care—the look on his face said he knew there was no meaning in excuses at this point.

“At least state the reason you gave such an order.”

“At the time, the war against the Arbor faction had intensified significantly. I was aware my fool of a son’s testimony was questionable, but I chose to prioritize the stability of the political situation and used Sir Amakawa as a scapegoat. I sent that girl after him to eliminate the possibility of him returning to make an unfavorable testimony,” Duke Huguenot explained smoothly.

“How could you...” Flora mumbled in shock, at a loss for words from the events she had been unaware of. Christina also had a bitter look on her face.

“I-It’s a lie...” Stewart shook his head, unable to accept reality.

“It’s not a lie. This was all your— No, I have committed the same sin as my son. I will accept whatever punishment is decided.”

Duke Huguenot was about to direct his anger at Stewart but immediately gave up and hung his head.

“No! I won’t stand for this! I know he still has a guilty past hidden away!” Stewart yelled, struggling in vain.

“Silence! There isn’t a thing in his past that he has to feel guilty for,” Christina snapped sharply. It was an anger she rarely expressed with her usual calmness, but Stewart was on the brink of ruin, and he wasn’t about to falter at that.

“You’re all lying! I know Alphonse had to have been killed by him!”

“Alphonse? Why do you bring up that man’s name now?”

“Shortly after this man appeared before us, Alphonse vanished! The timing was no coincidence! It’s obvious he eliminated him to get his revenge against us!”

“What absolute nonsense...”

“This is no nonsense! If you just think about it, you’d realize it! Why do you all refuse to see how suspicious he is?! Ah, I see: It’s because you’re that desperate to borrow his power, isn’t it?!” Stewart scoffed at Christina as though he saw through her intentions.

“What are you saying?”

“You want to get on his good side now that he’s made it in life, don’t you? That’s why you’re willing to discard me, just like my father once did to him! You’re despicable— Guh?!”

Stewart, who had been shouting at the top of his lungs, was silenced by the pressure Vanessa placed on his back. He gasped for breath in agony.

“My apologies. I couldn’t bear to listen any longer. I believe the statement just now would also count as lèse-majesté,” Vanessa apologized with a frown.

“Your timing is appropriate,” Francois said. “I cannot imagine him digging his grave further to produce any more sins than this. All that’s left is to give a sentence, but...”

“An Honorary Knight is of high-ranking status equal to a count. When their honor is defamed unjustly, the gravest possible punishment is the death penalty, father,” Charlotte said, explaining the weight of the crime brightly.

Of course, Francois knew that already, but she had said it out loud on purpose to make Stewart aware of the weight of his crime. A light crime wouldn’t result in the death penalty, and because of the type of crime it was, it would require Rio to make an accusation as a victim first, but she purposefully failed to mention that—and the result was extremely effective.

“Guh...” The blood drained from Stewart’s face.

“Oh? Your complexion was fine just a moment ago. Are you suddenly feeling unwell? Please let up on the pressure a little.” Charlotte gave an order as though she was concerned, but it was clear to everyone that it was just for show.

“Right away.” Vanessa looked to Christina for confirmation, then loosened her hold on Stewart.

“D-Duke Gregory, help me! You promised your assistance, didn’t you?!” Stewart shouted, seeking salvation from Duke Gregory.

“That was under the premise of Amakawa actually being a criminal. To think you’d tell so many lies to deceive me... I wish you never got me involved in this.” Duke Gregory discarded Stewart with an annoyed look, maintaining his uninvolvement.

“I will be questioning you afterward, Clement.”

“Naturally.”

Francois immediately kept Duke Gregory in check, to which Duke Gregory nodded calmly.

Hmph. Useless man, Duke Gregory thought as he looked down on Stewart.

“Ugh... Guh... Waaah!” Stewart started wailing.

“Oh my, he’s crying. Poor thing. When someone’s this foolish, they become more pitiful than comical,” Charlotte said, smiling charmingly in contrast to her words.

“Since he’s so grating on the ears, hand him to the knights outside and have them escort him to jail. Have him await his sentencing in fear. Does the Restoration have any objections?” Francois asked in confirmation.

“I do not,” Christina replied, shaking her head without hesitation.

“Stand up.”

Vanessa used the rope used for restraint that she always carried on her to tie Stewart's arms behind his back and make him stand up.

"D-Damn it! Stop! Stop it!"

Stewart struggled with all his might, but he was dragged out of the room, helpless. Once the room became silent again...

"Now, Haruto. How do you wish for this incident to be resolved? Duke Huguenot's actions were made before you became an Honorary Knight of our kingdom, and by our laws, we cannot retroactively punish him. It will have to be left to the Restoration's judgment, but..."

To put it another way, there was plenty of potential to place pressure on them for a heavier punishment. Francois's question to Rio had that meaning hinted implicitly.

"I've already told Queen Christina and Princess Flora my past. In doing so, I also told them I had no intention of bringing up the past again. I have no personal interest in what punishment is given, but what Latifa thinks is a different matter, as this incident has directly threatened her peace of mind."

Rio stood up and moved before Latifa. She had been sitting on the chair with her head down and body curled up, but when Rio came up to her, she looked up.

"I'm sorry, Latifa. I didn't protect you properly."

"No, you protected me, Onii-chan. I'm sorry for losing my composure too."

"What would you like to happen from here, Latifa? Can you forgive him or not? I will make sure whatever you say happens." Rio crouched down to meet her eye level.

"As long as I never have to see him again, I don't care. I'll leave it to you, Onii-chan."

Latifa made no attempt to look at Duke Huguenot. She probably didn't even want to be in the same room as him and was just enduring it right now.

"You heard her. If you never come near Latifa or threaten her peace again, I will not ask for anything else."

"And you're sure about that?"

"Yes. I don't want to waste anymore time bothering with this."

"Heh. I see," Francois said with a bemused chuckle. He then looked at Christina and Duke Huguenot. "Then that settles it. In regard to Duke Huguenot, we will yield to the Restoration's judgment and not seek any punishment."

"Thank you for the generous words. However, as a leader of the organization, Duke Huguenot must face some consequence for his actions. That is how severe his past is. You two may not care about the sentence, but I will be deciding one

in the next few days."

Christina bowed her head deeply to Rio and Latifa, expressing her intention to punish Duke Huguenot.

"I will accept whatever sentence you decide. I will not run or hide either. And I vow to never approach Sir Amakawa and his little sister Lady Suzune ever again."

Duke Huguenot was already in a state of resignation, bowing his head calmly like Christina. There was a brief moment where he looked at Latifa with a complex expression that differed from anger, but that emotion promptly vanished.

"I shouldn't allow him to remain before the two of you any longer. I will remove him from the room immediately, but please give me a chance to give my apologies and report on the resolution at a later date."

Christina offered to leave the room, leading the Restoration to the exit before waiting for Rio's reply. Duke Huguenot followed right after her.

Flora was looking at Rio and Latifa like she wanted to say something, but she probably thought it was best for her not to be the one to initiate conversation. She bowed once and made her way to the door, when...

"U-Um! Princess Flora...and Lady Roanna," Latifa called out, having made up her mind.

The two paused in their steps.

"The sleepover promise. I really hope you'll remember to come. You may hate me for being a werebeast, but...everyone else is looking forward to it too..." Latifa timidly invited the two of them.

"I-I don't hate you at all, Suzune!" Flora burst into tears and hugged Latifa.

"Ah..." Having expected to be scorned or treated with disgust, Latifa looked surprised. "Thank you very much, Princess Flora," Latifa said with tears in her eyes.

"I should be the one thanking you! I'm sorry, Suzune! Sir Haruto! I-If only I hadn't almost fallen off the cliff...!" Flora sobbed, bawling at the top of her lungs. She must have been blaming herself in her heart, and those feelings had exploded.

"Flora..."

Christina had left the room with Duke Huguenot but returned when she realized her little sister was crying.

"P-Please don't cry. If it wasn't for that incident, I wouldn't have met Onii-chan. If that had happened, I wouldn't have been able to meet you, Princess

Flora," Latifa said, giving her thoughts while returning Flora's hug.

"Suzune!"

Overcome with emotion, Flora started crying even harder. She was no longer in a state where she could move right away.

"I will bring Princess Flora to you later. Please return first, Queen Christina. You go too, Elise," Roanna said, encouraging Christina to move. Thus, the uproar caused by Stewart more or less came to an end.

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Chapter 8: Rainy Night Rendezvous

Then, later that night...

Thanks to Latifa summoning the courage to speak to Flora, another sleepover was held. The visitors were the same as yesterday: Christina, Flora, Roanna, Hiroaki, Kouta, Rei, and Lilianna, as well as Liselotte and Aria.

After they were done eating and chatting, it was time to sleep.

I was worried what would happen for a moment there... I'm glad it all sorted out okay.

Rio was sitting on his bed in his bedroom, lost in his thoughts. He recalled the sight of Latifa chatting happily with Flora and the others just now, and his mouth curled in a smile.

Just then, a loud noise could be heard outside.

"Rain, huh..."

Rio stood up and moved to the window, opening the curtain to gaze outside. That being said, the rain clouds had covered the moon, so he could barely see outside.

It was a sudden downpour out of nowhere. It had been sunny during the day, so rain this heavy was completely unexpected. For some reason, it reminded him of the incident today, dampening his mood.

I wonder if it'll stop by morning.

If it was still pouring in the morning, Christina and the others might have to delay their departure.

"Huh?"

As he was thinking, Rio spotted a faint shadow in the garden.

Who's that?

He immediately sharpened his vision through a physical body enhancement.

He hadn't been mistaken after all. He couldn't tell who it was, but they didn't seem to be an insurgent. They were standing in the garden too openly for that.

But he couldn't understand what reason they would have to be in the garden. Why at this hour, when they should be asleep? And more importantly, why in this heavy rain? The rain had only just started, so they probably hadn't walked out in the rain intentionally.

Rio was so curious, he decided to go out into the garden.

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At night, naturally, there was no one walking in the garden of the mansion at this hour. With the exception of the person Rio had just spotted, that is.

Rio used wind spirit arts to cast a barrier that would keep him dry, then approached the spot where he had seen the person.

Then, he found them. The rain was pouring so heavily, the sound of it could drown out any conversation.

Queen Christina?!

When he came within a few meters of her, Rio realized that the person was Christina.

However, Christina was gazing up at the sky with her back to the mansion, failing to notice Rio had approached her.

Once he was within one meter of her...

“You’ll catch a cold!” Rio shouted at Christina.

Christina slowly turned back and stared at Rio in a daze. “Sir Amakawa...”

“What are you doing?” Rio immediately widened his barrier to cover her from the rain too.

“I wanted to feel the rain against my skin,” Christina said, but Rio immediately thought she was lying. Rio had spotted the figure in the garden as soon as the rain had started. At the very least, she hadn’t been in the garden because she wanted to feel the rain.

Rio noticed Christina’s body was trembling. She had to be drenched all the way through her clothes, down to her skin.

The current season was winter. While winters in Galarc weren’t freezing cold, the current temperature was around ten degrees Celsius. In the rain, it would feel even colder.

And so, Rio used spirit arts to generate a warm wind to warm up Christina’s body.

“No thank you.” Christina stepped out of the barrier Rio had created.

“Why?” Rio immediately followed her, covering her with his barrier again.

“I just said I wanted to feel the rain against my skin.”

Christina looked down and away from Rio out of guilt. Her side profile made her look awfully fragile. She looked frail enough to knock down with a light touch. Just what was she thinking as she did this?

“Is it because of the incident today?” There was only one reason he could think of.

“I was just thinking to myself. I’ll only be here a little longer, so please go back first,” Christina replied, turning her face away from Rio and walking out of the barrier once again.

He thought that was definitely a lie. If he left her out here, he had the feeling she’d remain in the rain until she collapsed.

Just then, for some reason, Lina’s words flashed through Rio’s mind.

“You should get more disciples besides Sora. The first one I suggest is Christina Beltrum.” Did that have something to do with this?

This situation, this scene—had Lina foreseen it? He was curious, but now wasn’t the time for that. As Christina left, a feeling of rejection exuded from her back, as though she couldn’t bear to be beside Rio.

“I understand.”

Rio canceled the barrier that was acting as an umbrella and lined up beside Christina. His clothes were immediately soaked through by the rain.

“Huh?”

At that moment, Christina’s expression showed shock for the first time. She paused in her tracks and looked at Rio’s face beside her. She probably couldn’t understand why Rio was getting wet too.

“Just a little longer, right? I’ll keep you company until then,” Rio said with a mischievous smile.

“Why?”

Christina’s dumbfounded gaze was fixed on Rio’s side profile.

“I just so happened to be in the mood to feel the rain too. What a coincidence.”

Rio looked up at the dark night sky without making eye contact with her. The rain was still pouring hard, but strangely enough, his voice could be heard clearly.

“That’s too much of a coincidence. There’s no way.”

“There is a way. That’s why it’s called a coincidence.”

Christina was at a loss for words in spite of herself. However, she still looked like she wanted Rio to leave. But she was unable to voice that request and fell into a bitter silence.

“This is just small talk, but I was talking to my little sister today,” Rio said, still looking up at the sky.

“What were you talking about?”

Christina gave up and looked at the rainy sky as well, going along with his small talk.

“It was a talk about how it’s okay to whine and rely on others when you’re lost or troubled about something.”

Christina gasped and looked back at Rio’s profile. Her eyes were trembling with sadness and surprise, and tears threatened to flow at any moment.

“I might be meddling in something that’s not my business, but if you’re willing to talk, I’m happy to listen,” Rio offered gently.

“Please don’t say that,” Christina said, straining to speak in a voice bursting with sadness as she stared at Rio.

“Why?”

“Because it’ll make me want to rely on you...”

“I’m telling you I want you to rely on me.”

Rio turned his head and stared right back at Christina. Christina’s expression clearly wavered.

“I don’t have the right...” Christina lowered her head as though she was being heavily weighed down.

“Funnily enough, you don’t need the right to talk to me.”

“It’s because it’s you that I need the right. I don’t want to show you my weakness either. Not to anyone, but especially not to you...”

Gaze still lowered, Christina murmured as though she was talking to herself. However...

“In that case, what if we each whined about one thing to the other?”

Rio patiently persisted. He spoke to her in a light tone, as though to hold up the weights dragging down her heart.

At that, Christina finally lifted her head.

“What’s the point of that?” she asked weakly.

“Because I want to,” Rio replied without hesitation.

Christina’s entire body jumped in a flinch. She then swallowed her breath.

“Do you hate the idea?” Rio asked, peering into her face.

“I-It’s not that I hate it...”

Unable to look directly at Rio, Christina averted her face. She found his question unfair. If he had asked her if she wanted to or not, she would have answered no.

“Then, since I was the one to suggest it. The person standing beside me is clearly bothered by something, but she refuses to disclose it to me. The thought of her troubles being related to the incident today makes me feel so concerned,

I'm worried she'll spend the whole night standing in the rain. In order to spare me from my worries, please tell me what you're thinking. And rely on me," Rio said in a slightly joking tone, staring at Christina.

"That's unfair," Christina objected in a choking voice.

"My little sister likes to say that a lot too. Come to think of it, she said it to me just today."

Rio chuckled awkwardly, scratching his cheek.

Christina pouted, finally looking back at Rio at a distance where their shoulders could touch. However, at that point, Rio was already looking back up at the darkness to hide his shyness.

Look this way. Look at me...

Save me...please.

Christina quietly moved her lips.

Those were, indeed, her words of weakness; they were her genuine thoughts. They weren't the words of a strong, high-minded princess that carried the future of her nation.

She had always shut these words away in the depths of her heart; it was the weak, unreliable voice of a young girl seeking salvation.

But the sound of the rain got in the way, and the words never reached Rio's ears. No, it was precisely because she knew the downpour would erase her words that she uttered them.

"Huh?"

Rio looked at Christina puzzledly, thinking she had said something to him.

"Is something the matter?" he asked nervously.

"You're sure, right?"

The hesitation in Christina's expression had lightened significantly. She was no longer a small girl, and had returned to putting on the face of a princess. Her gaze told Rio he was too late to back down.

"Of course," Rio said, nodding immediately.

"I was troubled by whether the decision I am about to make for the future is truly the best decision. I couldn't find the resolve to do it out of fear. What if it's a mistake? No... Maybe I wanted it to be a mistake."

Christina muttered her feeble complaints weakly. They were indeed her words of weakness, and her true thoughts.

"You're the wisest person I know. I can't imagine you making a mistake..."

"Thank you very much. When you say that, it gives me confidence."

Christina smiled from the bottom of her heart.

“But even then, I don’t have the courage to make my decision. So this might be shameless of me, but could I receive some courage from you?” she asked, somewhat reservedly.

“Courage?”

“Yes. When I think of the future, I can’t help but falter in fear. So please give me courage, just for a little while. That’s what I’d like to rely on you for,” Christina said, standing face-to-face with Rio.

“Of course, I’d love to help where I can. But how...”

Rio gave his agreement, but the request was abstract, so he brought a hand to his mouth to consider the method to go about that.

“It’s okay,” Christina interrupted, taking a step towards Rio.

“Huh?”

A soft impact hit Rio’s body.

“I’ll take it for myself.”

Christina clung to Rio, burying her face in his chest. Her wet skin and clothes stuck to him.

“Wha...” Rio’s entire body froze out of shock.

Under the pouring rain, he could feel Christina’s burning heartbeat against him. Furthermore, he could clearly tell Christina’s body was trembling from the cold.

Christina wrapped her arms around Rio’s back as though to seek the warmth of his skin. She hugged his body towards her. Christina’s soft body pressed against Rio’s harder one. The next moment...

In my opinion, the first new disciple you should get is Christina Beltrum.

Once again, Lina’s words echoed in Rio’s head. But Rio’s mind was so blank, he couldn’t process the words at all.

“Hah... Hah...”

For some reason, the sound of Christina’s hot breath was louder than the rain pouring down in the dark.

The rain was cold enough to feel like it would freeze the moment it touched his skin, but the only thing Rio could feel was the almost burning warmth of the girl who seemed about to freeze to death and vanish at any moment.

At the very least, at this moment in time, he couldn’t think of this frail, helpless girl as a princess carrying the future of a nation on her back...

Rio gave Christina’s cold, shivering body a gentle hug in return.

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Afterword

Hello everyone, this is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for reading Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Vol. 26: Where Fiction Lies.

So, how did you all enjoy volume 26? As those who have read the book would know, the lies told in volume 1 and 2 have finally been revealed. Personally, I am very satisfied by this volume, as I was finally able to write that scene. By the way, the “Fiction” in the subtitle of volume 26 is referring to the “Lies” in the subtitle of volume 1.

Furthermore, the special edition of volume 26 will be on sale with a drama CD, which features a snippet of their daily life shortly after the events of volume 26. Readers who wish to enjoy more of the daily life that Rio finally regained, please give the drama CD a listen. The heroines delve into the matter of why Rio is so popular in a very amusing conversation. The cast all bring out the best of the characters, and Masato also joins the drama CD cast for the first time!

I also have a very important announcement to make! That’s right: Season 2 of the Seirei Gensouki anime will be airing in October 2024. It will air shortly after volume 26 goes on sale, so please take the time to check it out.

As with season 1 of the anime, I have participated in the anime since the script meetings and attended the setting checks and recordings, but I’ll be enjoying the broadcast as a fan and not as the original author. I’ll be doing a watchalong on X, so please drop by and enjoy season 2 of Seirei Gensouki with me!

Finally, the audiobook of volume 1 of the original Seirei Gensouki went on sale on Amazon the other day. An audiobook is a service where a voice actor reads the text of a book aloud, allowing for you to read through your ears. And so, those who wish to enjoy the reading of the Seirei Gensouki original novel, please check that out. I highly recommend you listen to it while commuting to work or before falling asleep.

That’s all this time. Let’s meet again in volume 27!

Yuri Kitayama
August 2024

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Bonus Short Story

Sleeping Beauty of the Mansion

One night in the Galarc Castle, Christina participated in a sleepover at Rio's mansion with Flora. Ever since everyone regained their memories of Rio, Latifa and Flora had become closer than ever before, and these gatherings happened regularly.

After arriving at the mansion, Christina was led to a guest room. It was the same room she always used when she stayed over at Rio's mansion. Thanks to that, she was completely accustomed to the sight of the furniture in the room...

A plushie?

Which was why she immediately noticed the unfamiliar object by the pillow on her bed. Yes, it was a cute plushie.

This plushie...looks like Sir Amakawa?

Christina picked up the plushie in both hands and stared at it. The plushie seemed to have Rio's features in a simplified form.

Hee hee, how cute.

Christina chuckled softly, hugging the plushie to her chest.

But did someone forget this here?

If so, she needed to return it to its owner. Christina had just left the guest room with the plushie in her arms, when she ran into Flora, who had left her own room at the same moment.

"Ah, Christina."

She had a plushie of the exact same design clutched carefully to her chest.

"Oh, that plushie..." Christina said.

"Was there one in your room too?" Flora asked.

"Yes, by the pillow on the bed."

"Same here. I was worried someone left it behind, but..."

"Was it placed there as decoration? Let's go and ask."

"Okay," Flora said with a nod. Just then, Latifa appeared in the hallway and noticed the sisters holding the plushies.

"Ah! That plushie will give you a better night's rest if you hug it while you sleep," she said. "I left it in your rooms to help your sleep quality."

“We were worried someone had forgotten it by accident, but that doesn’t seem to be the case,” Christina explained, exchanging a look with Flora and giggling.

“It does seem like it’ll help,” Flora said, hugging the plushie gingerly.

“If you find it helpful, you can take it back with you as a present,” Latifa said.

“Huh? Are you sure?”

“Yes. We all made lots of the same plushie together.”

“I’m sure it’ll help a lot. I can’t wait to go to bed tonight. Right, Christina?” Flora said happily, turning to her sister.

I’m past the age of going to bed with a plushie though... Christina thought to herself.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she replied bashfully.

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Later that night, after getting ready for bed...

“Good night, Christina.”

“You too.”

After parting ways with her little sister for the night, Christina returned to her room. She walked up to her bed and made eye contact with the plushie by her pillow. Christina sat down on the bed and silently picked up the plushie with both hands.

“You’re kind of cute,” she said. “What should I call you? Sir Amakawa? Haruto? Or even Rio?”

Of course, the plushie didn’t reply.

“Well? Which one?” Christina asked impatiently, pinching the plushie’s cheeks. Naturally, there was still no reply.

How silly of me. I must be tired.

Christina giggled to herself in amusement, then lay down hugging the plushie. Less than ten seconds later, she was fast asleep.

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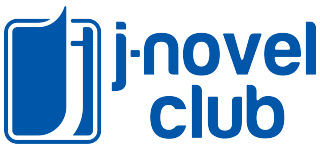

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